NO REST FOR THE WICKED

AUSTRALIA'S #1 PC GAMING MAG

PC PowerPlay

Fallout TV SHOW

- SEASON 2 CONFIRMED
- **THE IMPACT ON FALLOUT 5**
- LUCY'S LEVEL REVEALED

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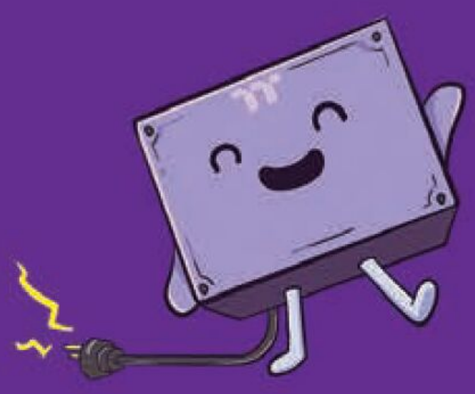

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Future Publishing Australia,
PO Box Q1179, Queen Victoria Building,
NSW 1230
Corporate Web: www.futureplc.com

Editorial
Editor **Ben Mansill**
ben.mansill@futurenet.com
Group Art Director **Troy Coleman**
troy.coleman@futurenet.com

Photography
All copyrights and trademarks are recognised and respected

Advertising
auadvertising@futurenet.com

Management
Managing Director: **Neville Daniels**
Commercial Director: **Chris Ferguson**
chris.ferguson@futurenet.com

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Chief executive **Jon Steinberg**
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Chief financial & strategy officer **Penny Ladkin-Brand**

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Who reckons Elden Ring Shadow of the Erdtree is already sitting pretty as a dead-set-cert for GOTY? Joab Gilroy does, because he's just been deep in the new world exploring and dying. A lot of exploring, and very, very many deaths...

Erdtree brings some very welcome additions to the legendary base game, as Joab explains in his big hands-on starting on page 14. We do like the greater freedom to go where you want and do things in the order you prefer. It builds upon the already vast and free open world the original game established.

FROM Software's kicked it out of the park, again. The depth in this incredible world will have us all determined to go everywhere and do everything. Will you? I get that this won't be everyone's thing, and that's ok. So please do check out what to play instead, or what to look forward to with all the rest of the lovely gaming goodness in this issue of PC PowerPlay. Enjoy!

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BEN MANSILL
EDITOR
ben.mansill@futurenet.com

"WE DO LIKE THE GREATER FREEDOM TO GO WHERE YOU WANT AND DO THINGS IN THE ORDER YOU PREFER."

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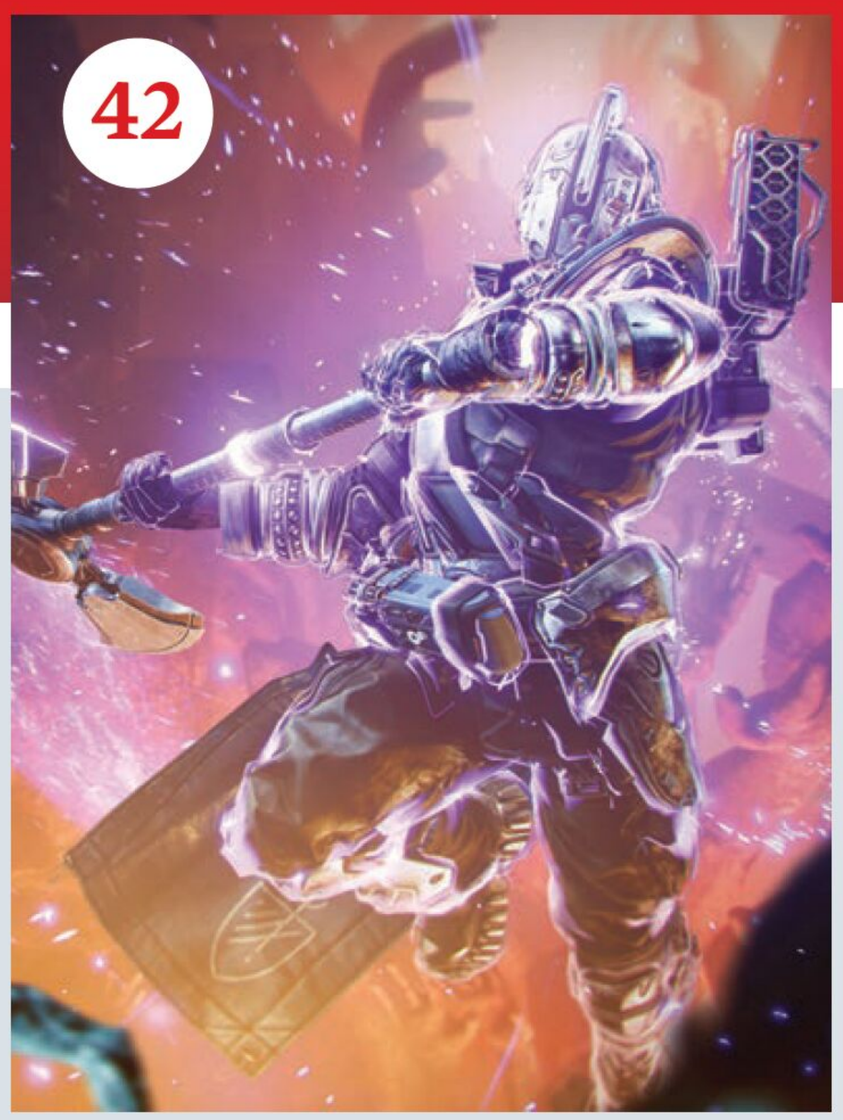

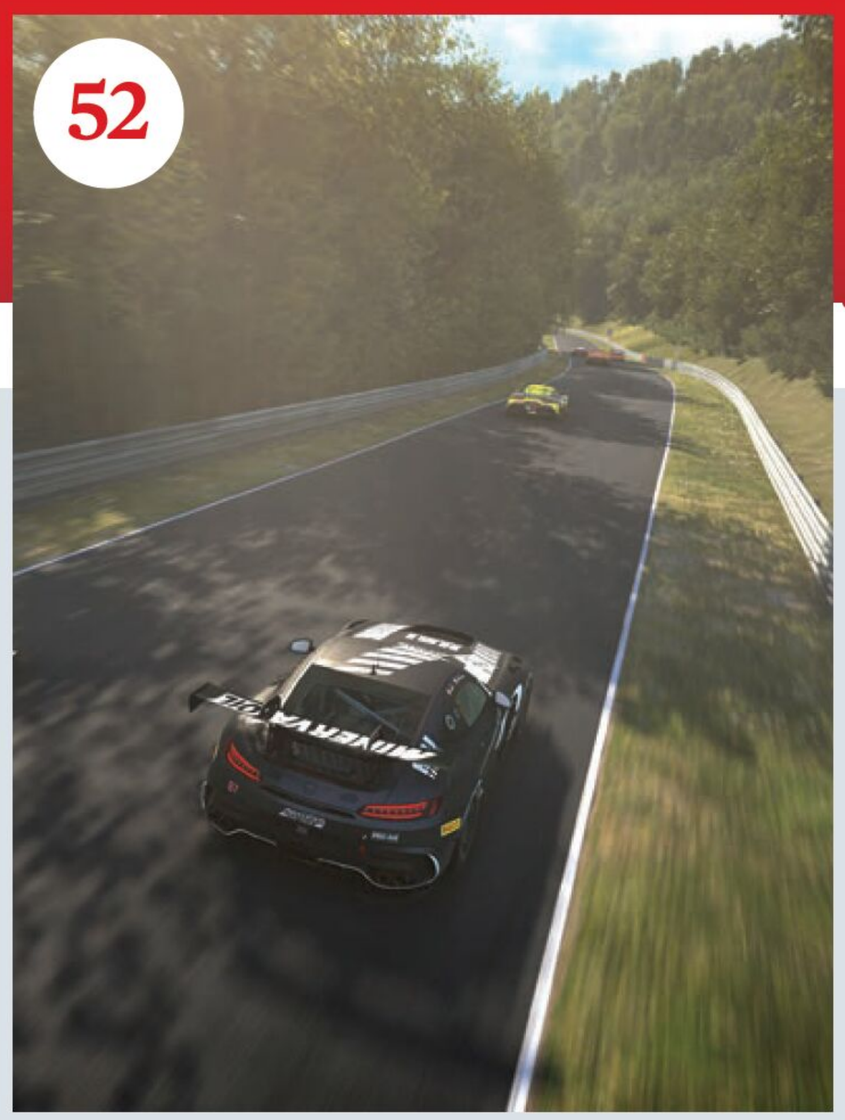

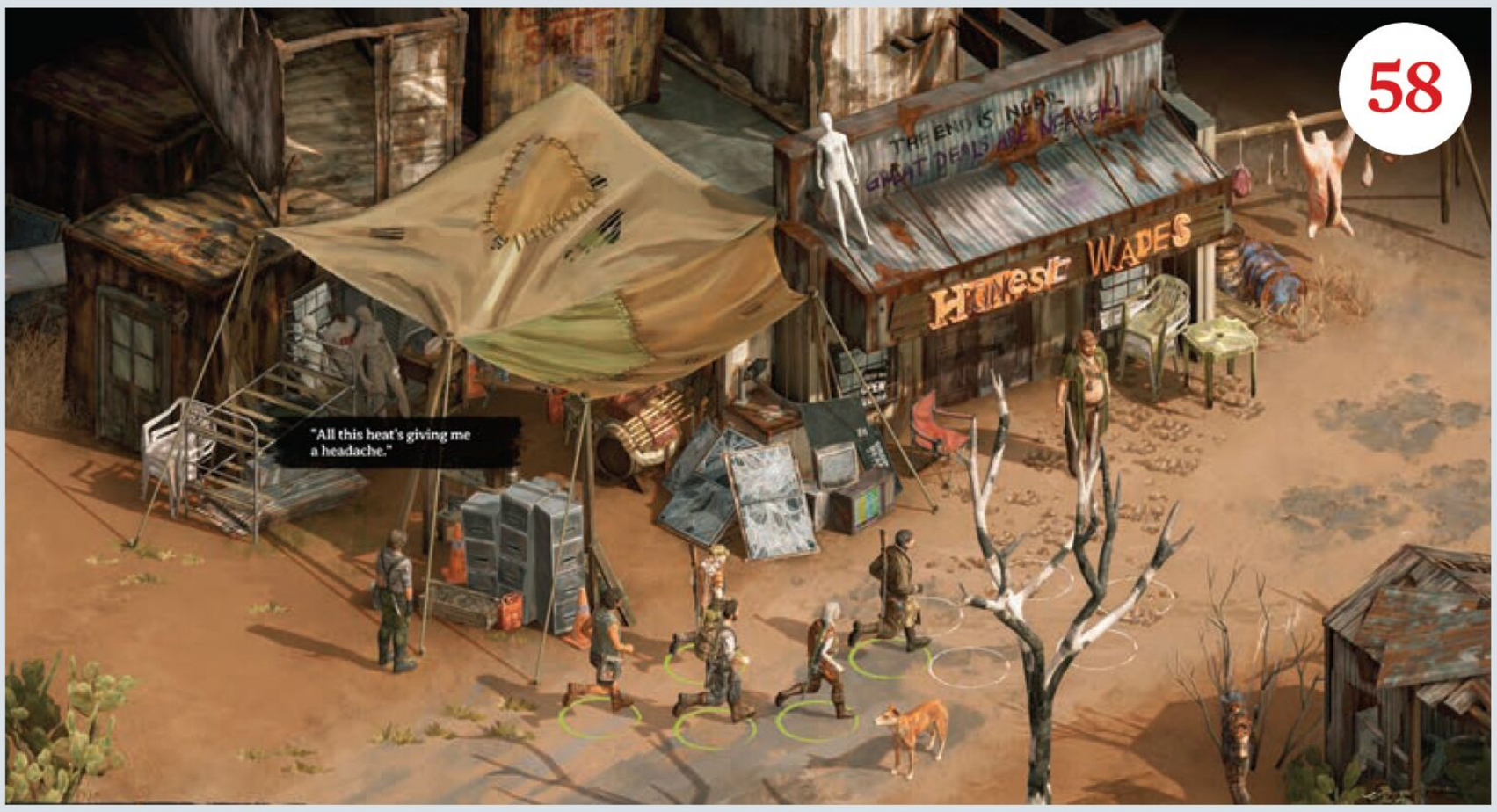

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The joy of riding in multi-seat vehicles.

The real question is: what mods are they using?

WHAT A SCRUB

Fallout's **LUCY** is barely tougher than a radroach

If you've been watching the recent Fallout TV series, then you'll understand just how much one of the protagonists, Lucy MacLean, has had to endure. But even after all her encounters with feral ghouls and wasteland monsters, it doesn't seem as if she has much to show for her work.

In response to a question about what level people thought Lucy was at by the end of the first season of the Fallout TV show, the gaming YouTube channel Many A True Nerd posted a theory thread on Twitter that laid out the most conclusive answer we've seen yet. The first task was to uncover what levelling system the TV show uses. It's safe to say that the series would use Bethesda's rules, which is what the maths whizzes have been using to estimate the ratio of XP achieved from combat and quests. But that actually works against Lucy, as she doesn't actually have too many combat encounters throughout the series.

THE FIRST TASK WAS TO UNCOVER WHAT LEVELLING SYSTEM THE TV SHOW USES

ON THE GRIND

One of Lucy's biggest sidequests and combat interactions is probably her fight in the organ-harvesting facility in episode four. After Lucy is sold for parts by Walton Goggins' character, the Ghoul, she has to fight off a Mr Handy as it tries to cut her in half. She also forces a couple of organ traffickers to open cooling pens, releasing ghouls and feral ghouls, one of which she kills. So not only does she survive the encounter and claim some great

A BENCHMARK REBORN

DIGITAL DENTIST

Final Fantasy XIV: Dawntrail has debuted its benchmark software, featuring the game's 7.0 graphics overhaul. Reviews were mixed. Most were content, but other players reported "lifeless" eyes. Sensing the oncoming hoard of OC upset, game director Naoki Yoshida promised a quick fix. ■ ***HR***

ESCAPING TARKOV

ALIENATING PLAYERS

A new $250 edition of *Escape From Tarkov* saw the game's playerbase turn on developer Battlestate Games. The *Unheard Edition* offered a new PvE mode, but not for existing players: even those who had bought a previous $150 edition that promised to include "all subsequent DLCs". ■ ***RS***

EXPENSIVE VISION

SNAP BACK TO REALITY

Meta's Reality Labs division continues to spend a huge amount of money on gym equipment – no, that can't be right. Ah, no, Meta is spending over a billion per month on technologies ending in 'reality', and making mere millions in return, while Zuckerberg is spending big on a "hot Zuck summer". ■ ***JR***

TOP: Lucy's many traumas don't equal much XP.

ABOVE: Old Walton Ghoulggins must have the highest level of all.

loot, like the 10mm pistol from *Fallout 4*, but she also gets her first kill. This episode felt like the making of Lucy. Not only did she finally test out all her martial arts and fighting training, which she brags about in the opening montage, but she also stayed true to her morals: handing the Ghoul the medicine he needs to stay compos mentis on her way out of the store.

POINTS FOR COMBAT

After weighing up all the possible situations in which Lucy could get experience points for combat, side and main quests, and companion kills when she's with Maximus or the Ghoul, estimates are that she acquired around 4,000-5,000 XP throughout the whole season, plus an extra 1,000 XP for completing the main quest. This would place Lucy at level 8, and even that is apparently a generous estimate.

Going by that, it feels like our hero was short-changed a bit considering all the emotional and physical stress she endured in season one. But hopefully, now she's got the hang of things, we'll see a levelling spike in season two, so she can make some serious ground. Maybe she'll even get to wear some power armour of her own. ■

Elie Gould

Highs & Lows

HIGHS

Stop Killing Games
A new campaign aims to secure protections that stop companies killing off games like *The Crew*.

Vamp It Up
Vampire Survivors' "most ambitious" patch yet promises "immersive door-opening action".

Armoured Up
The Fallout show designers decided to recreate power armour faithfully.

LOWS

Nuked
Fallout 4's next-gen patch has been so disastrous that the most popular mod is the one that removes it.

AI oh no
Card game Champions of Otherworldly Magic gave $90K to an "AI artist" because "no one comes close to [his] quality".

Mark of Cain
Original *Fallout* lead Tim Cain loves the show, but is sad about series fans attacking its makers.

The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

The Spy undertakes every single mission with maximum commitment. In the same way a tired magazine editor attacks a beer in PCPP Towers' 24-hour bar after another squeaky-bum-time deadline, the mission is not just in the execution, such as drinking the creamy, delicious beverage, but thoroughly preparing in advance.

From the research, involving deep contemplation as to which tipple to take on first, to the timing, which means deciding whether it is still too early to go to the pub, proper preparation prevents poor performance.

Which is why when The Spy was tasked with infiltrating the inner workings of Todd Howard's *Fallout 5* development team, The Spy started to prepare thoroughly. After all, Todd and The Spy have a history, with each major Bethesda release seeing The Spy attempting to purloin juicy insider dev secrets ahead of a game's launch, while the Toddster attempts to guard those secrets like a plump goose guarding a golden egg.

Getting in the right mindset for more post-apocalyptic content? That meant only one thing to The Spy, it was time to watch the movie Oppenheimer and, in what may be more slightly relevant to this deployment, the new Fallout TV show The Spy has been told so much about.

THE SPY
The Spy dreamt of caverns measureless to man, through which Alph, the sacred river, ran.

WAR NEVER CHANGES

The Spy's learnings? Forget about war never changing, it's humankind that seemingly doesn't, with the species seemingly hellbent on destroying itself and everything else at every opportunity. New scientific horizon unlocked that could be used to improve everyone's lives? Nah, let's make a super weapon that will kill hundreds of thousands instead. It wasn't just PCPP magazine's editor that needed a drink after watching Oppenheimer, it was The Spy, too.

The Fallout TV show, though, was good fun and set The Spy on course to discover that while the show's producer, Jonathan Nolan, has said, "It's almost like we're *Fallout 5*," The Spy can confirm that, no, the Fallout TV show is not *Fallout 5*. Instead, as The Spy discovered by going undercover as a Nuka-Cola vending machine in Bethesda's Rockville, Maryland, headquarters, the TV show in fact has had to actively avoid certain storylines and locations because they are reserved for *Fallout 5*. Indeed, The Spy overheard The Todd telling Nolan, "Don't do this, because we are going to do that in *Fallout 5*," and that Howard has a 'one-pager' detailing *Fallout 5*'s synopsis. As to the one-pager's details, unfortunately, Nolan ordered a Nuka-Cola and The Spy had to make a series of whirring and buzzing noises while dispensing the beverage, so didn't get the details.

TODD HOWARD HAS A 'ONE-PAGER' DETAILING FALLOUT 5'S SYNOPSIS

However, after using a Stealth Boy 3001 to gain access to Xbox Game Studios' headquarters in Redmond, California, The Spy overheard bigwigs stating they wanted to speed up the development of *Fallout 5* due to the success of the TV show, which is set in the New California Republic, and that basing the game in San Francisco was a possibility, with the series returning to its West Coast roots in terms of setting. As to Bethesda's trademarking of the name 'Fallout New Orleans'? A classic piece of Machiavellian misdirection from Todd Howard. Spy out. ■

The Spy

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WHALE OF A TALE

Inside the 14-year journey to hand-craft **HAROLD HALIBUT**'s big undersea adventure

H*arold Halibut* has been gestating for a long time. When the project began, art director Ole Tillmann wasn't married – indeed he wasn't even dating his future wife – and definitely didn't have a three-year-old daughter to bring to the office in Cologne as indie team Slow Bros put the finishing touches on their uniquely handmade game. "She recognises the models – she'll come to the office and be like, 'Oh, Harold's here!'" Tillman says with a laugh.

Across more than a decade of development *Harold*'s team has gained and lost a publisher, done side jobs to stay afloat, moulded dozens of models out of clay and wire and tiny hand-sewn clothes, constructed elaborate sets for a sprawling underwater habitat, and learned how to bring them to digital life with photogrammetry and motion capture. Then there was a matter of combining all those things into a videogame. "Ole and I both lost our hair in that time," jokes game director Onat Hekimoglu.

They're a well-matched pair, and not just for the clean-shaven heads. Hekimoglu vibrates with enthusiasm and drove the team forward with unending positivity; Tillman admits he's the more critical one, but they both were deeply committed to finishing a game that at one point had seemed like it might become "a forever project".

In the beginning *Harold Halibut* was going to be a stop-motion point-and-click adventure, but after creating a prototype, Slow Bros' founding members discovered a couple of slight issues. "We actually didn't like point-and-click adventures any more – it was standing in the way of the storytelling, and we wanted to focus more on that," says Hekimoglu. "And with 2D stop motion, the sprites were kind of slapped on top of backgrounds and it just didn't work well." From that point the team experimented with photogrammetry, creating 3D scans of the sets and models that could then be converted into the game's environments and animated characters.

Tillman walked me through the process, starting with their loose imagination sessions to envision who would live on the Fedora I, a colony ship that crash-lands on a watery planet and becomes an unplanned undersea home. Those ideas would become sketches, and then final drawings of characters that he would translate to clay models in classic videogame T-poses with neutral facial expressions. They'd sew clothes onto the puppets, then set them up on a small turntable to take photographs from every angle, which could be combined into an extremely high-detail 3D scan. "When we started [photogrammetry] wasn't that conventional, so we spent a lot of time figuring that out with the internet community," he says. The 3D artists would then

Themes of home

Harold's story has taken on a nostalgic resonance for the devs as they look back. "The themes of home and friendship were informed by who we were in our mid-20s," Tillman says. "We were deep in our friendship-focused lives, living in shared housing together, and I find myself less in situations now deeply engaged in conversation between tight friends just wondering about life together."

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FROM SOFTWARE BANDAI NAMCO

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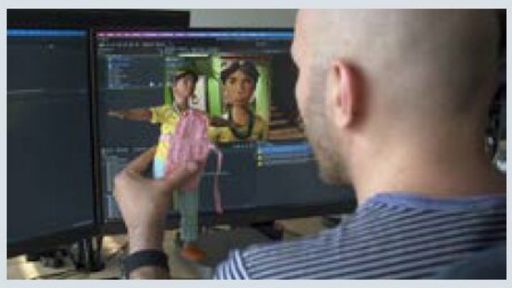
FAR LEFT: *Harold*'s full of stylish lighting and camerawork that hint at the dev team's film background.

LEFT: Onat Hekimoglu shoots Harold's room for the stop-motion prototype in his own bedroom, circa 2013, in a flat he shared with studio co-founder Daniel Beckmann.

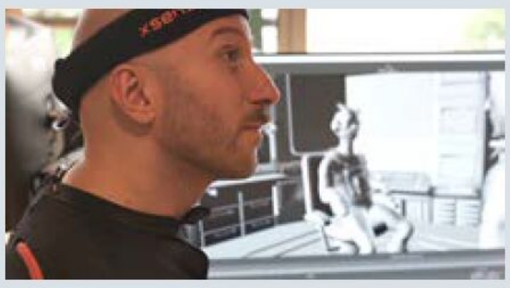
PUPPET'S JOURNEY *How Slow Bros transformed clay into characters*

MAKING A MODEL
Each character started life as a block of clay, then was dressed by costume designer Holle Schlickmann.

FROM CLAY TO POLYGONS
The ultra-detailed photogrammetry scan will then be simplified into a lower-poly model.



MODEL IN-GAME
The finalised game model gets imported into Unity, with texture data pulled from the photogrammetry scan.



VOICE ACTOR
Finally, characters are brought to life by a voice actor and motion capture performed by Onat Hekimoglu.

essentially 'trace' a new model out of the scan with more practical polygon counts, setting them up to be animated and inserted into the game without slowing Unity to a crawl. They'd then 'bake' all the details of the high-poly models onto the game-ready ones, ensuring the textures of the clay and clothing survived the digital transition.

"Everything [you scan] has the same glossiness and other material properties at first, so we manually go into programs like Substance Painter to define the physically correct material properties, like the hammer Harold has on his belt," says Hekimoglu. "We always use the original models as a comparison... you can just shine a flashlight on it and see how it reacts to the light, so you can really nail the digital models as well."

VOICED DIALOGUE

There's some nine hours of voiced dialogue in *Harold Halibut*, and initially the team had only planned to motion capture the most important cutscenes. "But the difference in how it looks and feels was so extreme, we decided to do everything," says Hekimoglu, who ended up performing all the motion capture himself in Slow Bros' small office. With every character's personality and the layout of each scene already in his head, it was cheaper and faster to act out each part individually rather than directing actors. "In hindsight when we look at those animations, I think it's crazy they work so well – we have complicated interactions with one character moving out of the way the moment another walks past them, and that was purely timed to the voice recordings."

EVERY MINIATURE IN HAROLD GOT THE SAME AMOUNT OF LOVE

The environments were inspired by Missouri high-rise development Pruitt-Igoe and other failed '60s and '70s social housing programmes that weren't very good at predicting real human needs (early on, Harold's stuck with a fine for taking the water slide public transit system with the wrong licence, which changes month-to-month). Room after room was hand-built to try to reflect a real functional space for this underwater society. Hekimoglu proudly points out that in most games the environmental details tend to get less detailed as you depart the main path, but every miniature in *Harold* got the same amount of love, even if it ends up being barely visible on a corner shelf.

While most game developers tend to cut features or levels to get a game out the door, Slow Bros decided on the basics of the story and how many people would live aboard the Fedora I early on, and that informed how big to make the environments. The team never deviated from that plan, and Hekimoglu says most of the development time went to "filling them out with life" making the game "wider" rather than longer. And also just learning how to make a videogame, something few of them knew.

After so many years, neither can quite believe it's finally finished. "I'm definitely coasting in mid-air," says Tillman. "I'm in that Wile E Coyote moment of having gone off the cliff, but not quite realised what's going on. But I'm also left with enthusiasm. But a nice thing about the long development is not being scared of what people might think. I know this is all we have to give." ■

Wes Fenlon

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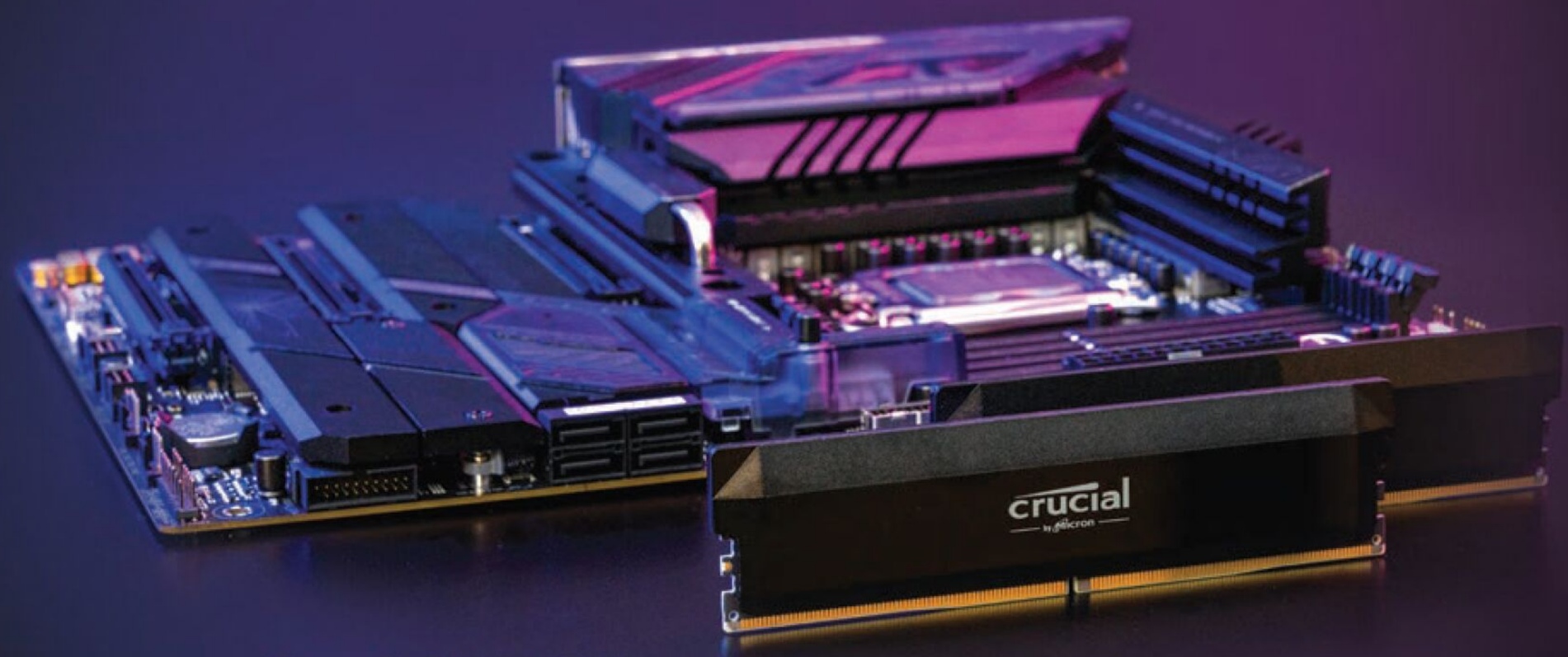

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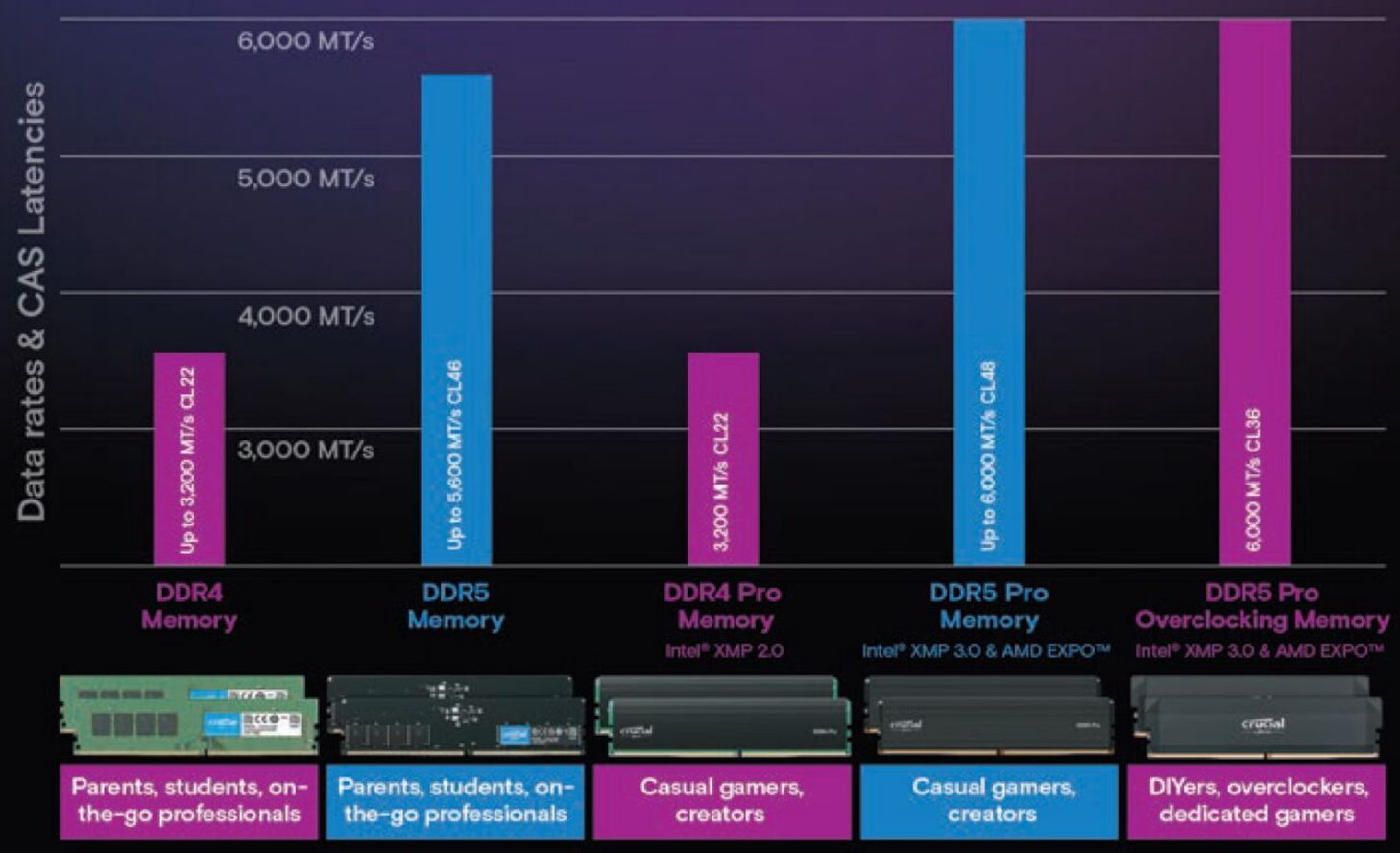

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Elden Ring: Shadow of the Erdtree

IN THE SHADOW OF GREATNESS

ELDEN RING: SHADOW OF THE ERDTREE is nearly here, and we got our hands on it! With 300+ hours in Elden Ring, Joab Gilroy is more than ready to fight in the shade.

Elden Ring: Shadow of the Erdtree

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
June 21	FromSoftware	Bandai Namco	bandainamcoent.eu

FromSoftware's DLCs are often underappreciated in their time. The problem is simple – *Souls* games are challenging and punishing endeavours that require players to build up a muscle memory, and often that muscle memory is long forgotten by the time the DLC releases.

What happens is you load up your save with your Level 200 Lord of Cinders character that you cleverly didn't take to New Game Plus, you stride confidently to the entrance point of the DLC, and then you promptly get your arse kicked the moment you encounter a basic enemy.

When that happens in the base game – and every souls game will throw some gnarly enemy at you early to force you to see a 'You Died' screen early – you brush it off because you don't know the game yet. But in the DLC it stings. You know this game. You've beaten this game. And now you're what? Scum? Foul Tarnished? Maidenless?

Hell no.

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

Elden Ring is different though. There's a reason From's biggest Soulslike game to date is also the most popular. The shift to an open world system changed everything for the genre they created. When you journey to The Land of Shadow for the first time, the new world before you is your oyster. If that first enemy is grinding you beneath its heel, you are free to just... go somewhere else.

In prior *Souls* games, you were always stuck with the lot you were given. You had, realistically, two choices. Learn how to beat the enemy, or sprint past them to maybe return later, when you were stronger. But *Elden Ring* gives players a Y axis to go with their X axis path, and that Y axis provides ample opportunity to become more powerful – be it through levels, player experience or gear.

The gear available in *Shadow of the Erdtree* is awesome, mind you. There's a lot of playing with Stances in *Erdtree*, with weapon arts that cost a tiny amount of FP but unlock entirely new (and powerful) movesets. The Milady Greatsword allows you to unleash a flurry of attacks at the press of a button, and even its regular R1 spam combo is a sight to behold.

My favourites – just as they were in the base game – were the fist weapons. The Wrist Wraps let you live out your Kung Fu Movie dreams, punching and kicking your way to victory. The animations crafted for them are fantastic and utterly unique. And then there were the Red Runebear Claws, all dashing swipes and two-handed pounces that I could see catching a few Bloody Finger Invaders off-guard. Of course, you probably have to fight a Runebear to get them...

IF THAT ENEMY IS GRINDING YOU BENEATH ITS HEEL, YOU ARE FREE TO JUST... GO.

PLAYED IT

BUT WHY?

People have made entire careers out of dissecting the stories in From Software's Action RPGs, and with good reason. The understated minimalism of the storytelling, the sometimes pixel perfect attention-to-detail and the epic nature of some of the fights players battle through leave so many people wondering 'why?'.

Of course we don't yet know all the reasons behind our first – and only – DLC adventure in *Elden Ring*. But with multiple trailers out already, boffins across the internet have pieced together as many details as possible.

For example, we know that Miquella "the Kind" is at the heart of our adventure. If that name is familiar, it's probably because you saw it staring at you for 40 plus hours while you tried to defeat "Malenia, Blade of Miquella". That's where it was seared into my brain.

In the preview, Miquella's presence was felt through a series of breadcrumb clues. By following in Miquella's footsteps, we will hopefully catch up to them. From what I saw, finding each new location following Miquella's trail lead us to Scadutree Blessings – the brand new way to increase your power in the *Shadow of the Erdtree* expansion.

At one point I received a hand-drawn map featuring possible Scadutree Blessing sites – obviously players can just look up guides online to solve this demi-divine

Editor Ben sending back copy edits

scavenger hunt, but it was fun puzzling out the locations on my own as I played through the preview session.

And we know that we'll be battling against Messmer the Impaler. Traditionally "good guys" don't go by the suffix "the Impaler". Messmer's a demigod, a snake enthusiast and probably a member of the dragon cult, but we'll have to wait to find out more.

BEYOND THE VEIL

What I don't need to speculate about are the bosses I fought in the preview. I found three, though there might have been one more at the end of a lengthy Torrent-focused parkour session: I ran out of time before reaching the summit.

The first truly terrifying enemy I encountered didn't have a name—it wasn't a boss, but it killed me faster than any of the foes hiding behind their yellow fog gates. Part Fire Giant, part Walking Barad-dûr, this guy was visible the moment I entered the glorious grass fields of The Land of Shadow. One stomp of his foot killed Torrent. The next killed me.

The first fight past a fog gate took place in the Western Nameless Mausoleum, a small dungeon I ran across when trying to avoid the fire guy. Wielding a rapid-fire crossbow and a greatsword, the Blackgaol Knight moved quickly, switched weapons at will and healed when he dropped below 30% HP. He killed me 14 times before I moved on.

The second boss can be seen in the trailers for the DLC – the Divine Beast Dancing Lion. With a great Lion head and a segmented body, the Dancing Lion twirled endlessly as he attacked. If you've finished Elden Ring, think Maliketh The Black Blade when he's jumping around in the air. If you're not familiar, imagine Emperor Palpatine doing the whirling dervish about 100 times a minute. At 75%, the Lion starts doing Lightning attacks. At 50% he cycles between Lightning, Wind and Frost magic. The Frost moves had almost zero wind-up, and of my 48(!) deaths to the Lion, easily 40 of them were in this phase.

The third boss was Rellana, Twin Moon Knight. Is she related to Rennala, Queen of the Full Moon? Are the From Software team just really bad at naming people? I don't have the answers to these questions for you. But Rellana is a classic Knight style boss fight. She's quick, she has stacks of poise and so she's tricky to stagger, and her katana-style blade has a longer reach than it initially seems. Remind you of anyone? Unlike Malenia, Blade of Miquella, though, Rellana did not appear to be weaponising Rot. She killed me 15 times before I decided I had to move on.

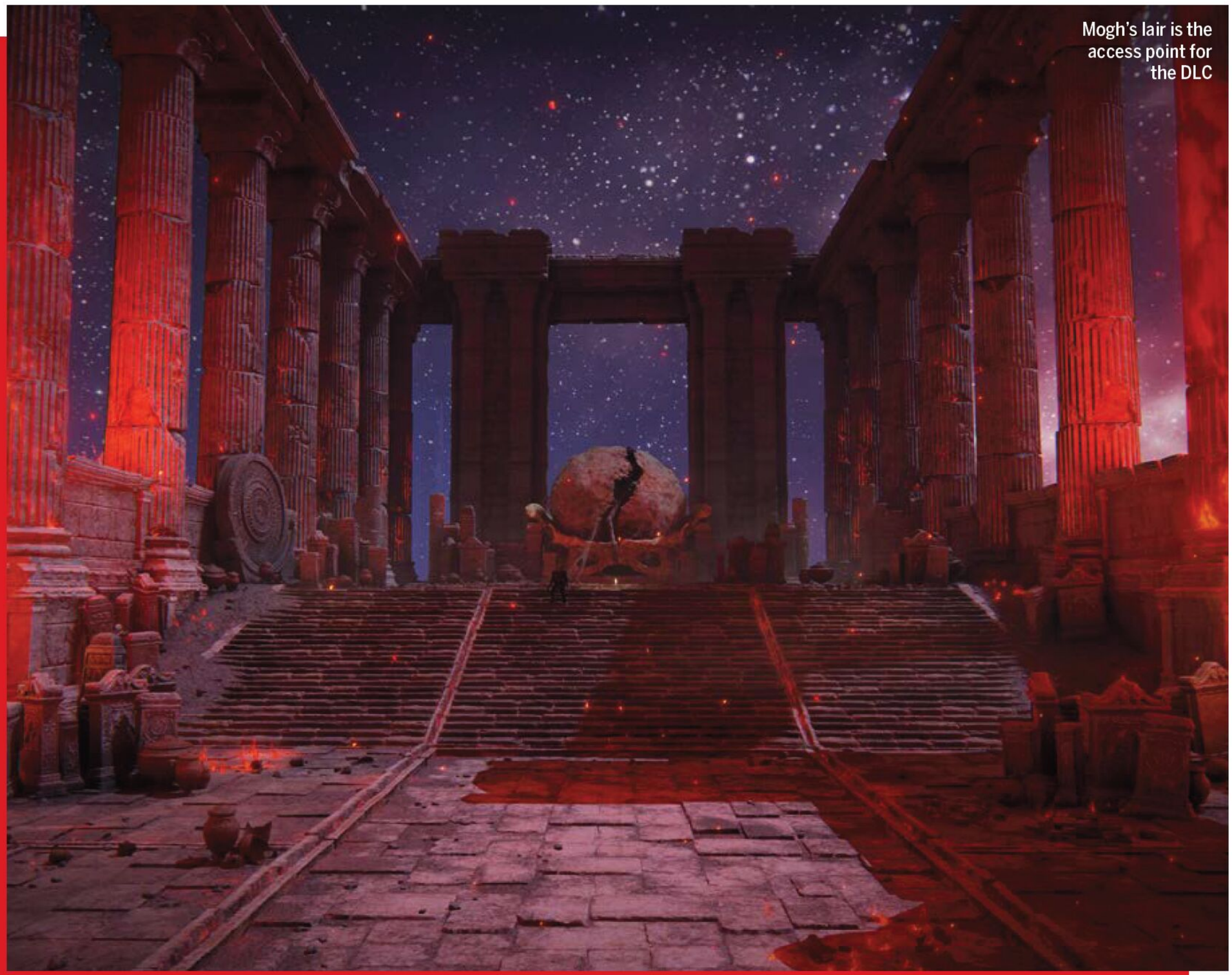
I didn't beat any of the bosses, but that didn't matter too much to me. I wanted to try out all the different weapons, to

SPIDERS, MAN

Like many Aussies I have a complicated relationship with spiders. On the one hand they are helpful little creatures who happily munch on any pests that might otherwise annoy you. On the other hand, they can kill you.

Shadow of the Erdtree understands this delicate balancing act. Among the spirit ashes in the preview build was the Fingercreeper, one of those hand-spiders you usually first encounter in Caria Manor. He attacked, he tanked, and most importantly, every now and then he'd raise his middle finger and cast a Great Heal that replenished his HP and the HP of anyone nearby. Truly the Jellyfish of the Preview build.

Then, when you enter Belurat Keep for the first time, you find out FROM Software can make the other kind of spider too.



Mogh's lair is the access point for the DLC

The perils of post-apocalyptic sun-bathing

These oversize birds will be your first foe in *SOTE*

Elden Ring: Shadow of the Erdtree

Legacy dungeons are back, as are smaller, puzzle-centric ones

THERE'S LEVELS TO IT

Our preview session provided us with an assortment of pre-made builds, all level 150. That's not to say 150 is the intended level for players – you can head on into the Land of Shadow at 300 if you want. Some of you mad bastards will probably try it at level 1.

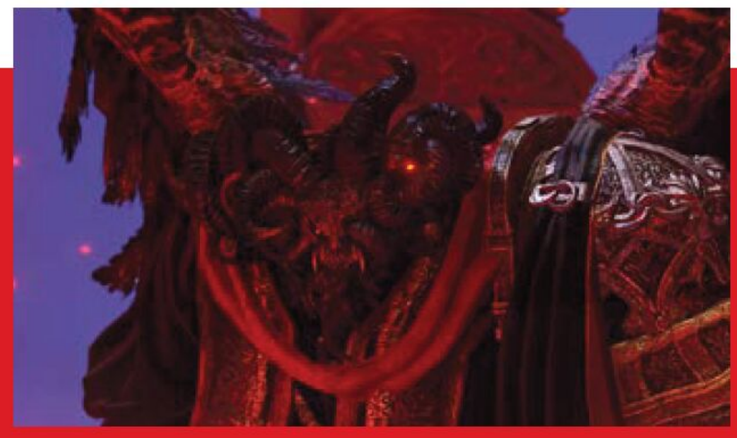
But 150 is around the sweet spot where players have enough points to define a playstyle without becoming a jack-of-all-trades by reaching the soft cap in every single stat. And while defeating enemies still dropped souls Runes, levelling up in *Shadow of the Erdtree* is slightly different.

Scadutree Blessings hidden around the world allow players to increase their power, but only in the DLC. Revered Spirit Ash Blessings do the same for your Spirit Ash Summons. Using these blessings at a Site of Grace conveyed a meaningful bump to both damage dealing and negation. We didn't bother crunching the exact numbers – they'd change between now and launch – but we estimated between a 10 and 15% increase in outgoing and decrease in incoming damage.

It's an interesting way for From to solve a common conundrum in their DLCs – how to get players to experience a typical progression curve when everyone is coming in with wildly different levels. By divorcing player power from the typical curve and appending it to a new system, *Shadow of the Erdtree* is able to keep players on an even footing.

You're still able to use souls to level up, of course, and increasing individual stats will still be extremely important when min/maxing your gear and build.

And *Shadow of the Erdtree* promises brand new gear for us to collect – new armour, weapons and spells are littered around the darkened lands now separated from The Lands Between.



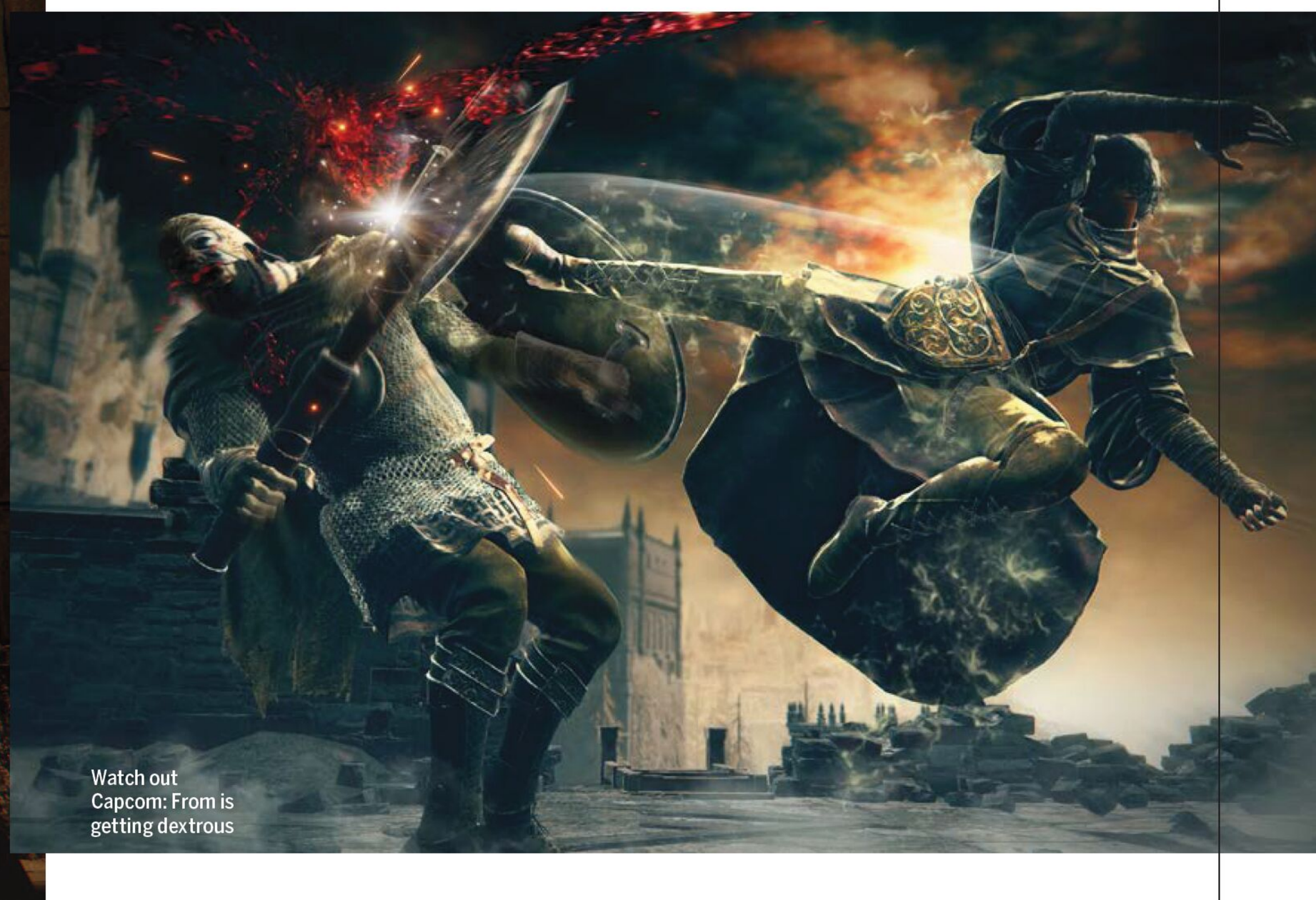
INTO THE DARK SIDE

To reach *Elden Ring*'s new DLC, you need to defeat two major bosses in the original game. If you want to puzzle this out for yourself, avert your eyes. Otherwise, read on.

The first boss you need to beat is the gravity-wielding Starscourge Radahn. The General rides the wastelands south of Redmane Castle in Caelid, his trusty steed Leonard carrying him in his endless rage. An optional boss for the primary quest in *Elden Ring*, you need to beat him before you can do the DLC. Why? You'll have to find out!

The second boss you have to beat is Mohg, the Lord of Blood, residing in Mohgwyn Palace. Yes, it's his palace. And to get to the palace, you need to either finish White Mask Varre's questline, or you need to head to the Consecrated Snowfields by using the Haligtree Secret Medallion.

If none of these words make sense to you, then *PC PowerPlay* needs to tell you that you might not be ready for the DLC anyway.



Watch out Capcom: From is getting dextrous

summon all the different spirit ashes, to jump up as many precarious cliff faces as I could find. And even as I was doing all of that, I was coming to the realisation that *Shadow of the Erdtree* might be exactly the same as *Elden Ring* only more so.

Once I found the map fragment in the part of the world we were allowed to visit—and we had a watcher from the head office making sure we didn't go anywhere we weren't allowed, mind you—I could see the sheer size of this new area. It's huge.

It feels wrong to open up Steam and see the purple sash across *Shadow of the Erdtree*'s title card, the one that says "DLC". Because even from the small amount I was allowed to experience, this felt more like a throwback to a long forgotten time when companies released full games and then epic, massive, game-changing expansion packs.

Elden Ring never stopped blowing me away with its depth, and from my time with the *Shadows of the Erdtree* expansion, this new chapter seems poised to do it all again. FromSoftware's biggest post-release content drop is just around the corner now, and I can't wait to see how deep things can get where the sun don't shine.

Elden Ring Shadow of the Erdtree is out June 21, 2024.

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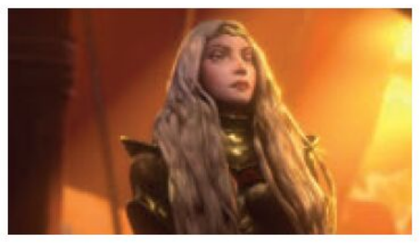
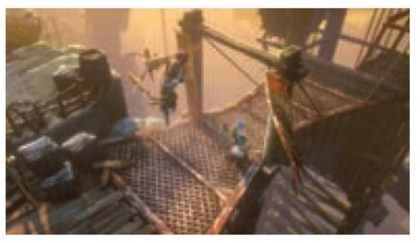




NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Out now (Early Access)

DEVELOPER
Moon Studios GmbH

PUBLISHER
Private Division

LINK
shorturl.at/InENU

NO REST FOR THE WICKED

One of the smartest Soulslikes I've played in a long time

Let's get this out of the way now: *No Rest for the Wicked* is absolutely not an action RPG in the style of *Diablo*. There is loot to find, yes, but it doesn't transform you into an untouchable god. *No Rest for the Wicked* is a lot closer to a Soulslike with its weighty, punishing combat and labyrinthine world. But with its isometric camera and gear rarity, it's also unlike most other games in the genre, and that's exactly makes it so promising.

No Rest for the Wicked, which comes from *Ori and the Blind Forest* developer Moon Studios (a developer I sincerely hope has cleaned up its act, lest it sour something great here) and just released into Early Access, does have many of the things you expect from a Soulslike: a bleak, fantasy atmosphere, weighty combat and nasty bosses. The ways you interact with the world, however, are vastly different than they are in *Dark Souls* or even *Elden Ring*. There are survival elements in it that remind me of *Breath of the Wild*, like having to gather herbs and meat to cook food. You can even pull out a fishing rod or an axe to chop down trees.

The island of Sacra doesn't seem to be dying like the setting of most Soulslikes. It's surprisingly lush: pockets of grass dance in the wind and seawater crashes against its rocky shores. There are crumbling towers and creaky wooden bridges, too, but Sacra is far from ruined. The plants you pick and the trees you chop down grow back over time and end up being essential to your survival in a Soulslike where dying isn't a massive setback. It's this quality that might be why a nearby religious order is intent on using the recent outbreak of a curse that turns people into monsters as an excuse to 'cleanse' it.

SACRA DOESN'T SEEM TO BE DYING LIKE THE SETTING OF MOST SOULSLIKES

BRUTAL ENCOUNTERS

You immediately learn that when one of *No Rest for the Wicked*'s mutated creatures sends you back to its bonfire equivalent, the enemies you killed don't reappear. You can run right back to where you were and try again. And I did so for a particularly brutal encounter with a group of soldiers who kept catching me mid-swing with fire bombs. I could've swapped to a pair of daggers for faster strikes, but half of the fun of a Soulslike is puzzling out encounters with a weapon – in my case a big two-handed sword – not fit for the job. Somewhere around the third or fourth death, I woke up with a broken sword and no ingredients left to cook more healing items.

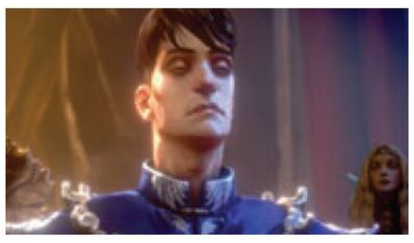
Item durability and crafted healing items are currently *No Rest for the Wicked*'s most controversial systems a day after its Steam Early Access release (and it's already dropped a small patch addressing durability). I like them as a replacement for having to retrace your steps and fight all the same enemies along the way. The problem is how severe the punishment can get if you're struggling with a particular encounter. It's possible to die enough times that your character is left naked and too powerless to earn enough gold to repair their inventory of broken items. The ways around it aren't communicated well. You can technically restart your game and pray that earlier parts of the game have repopulated with materials or you can tough it out and fist fight some enemies to scavenge for intermediary gear.

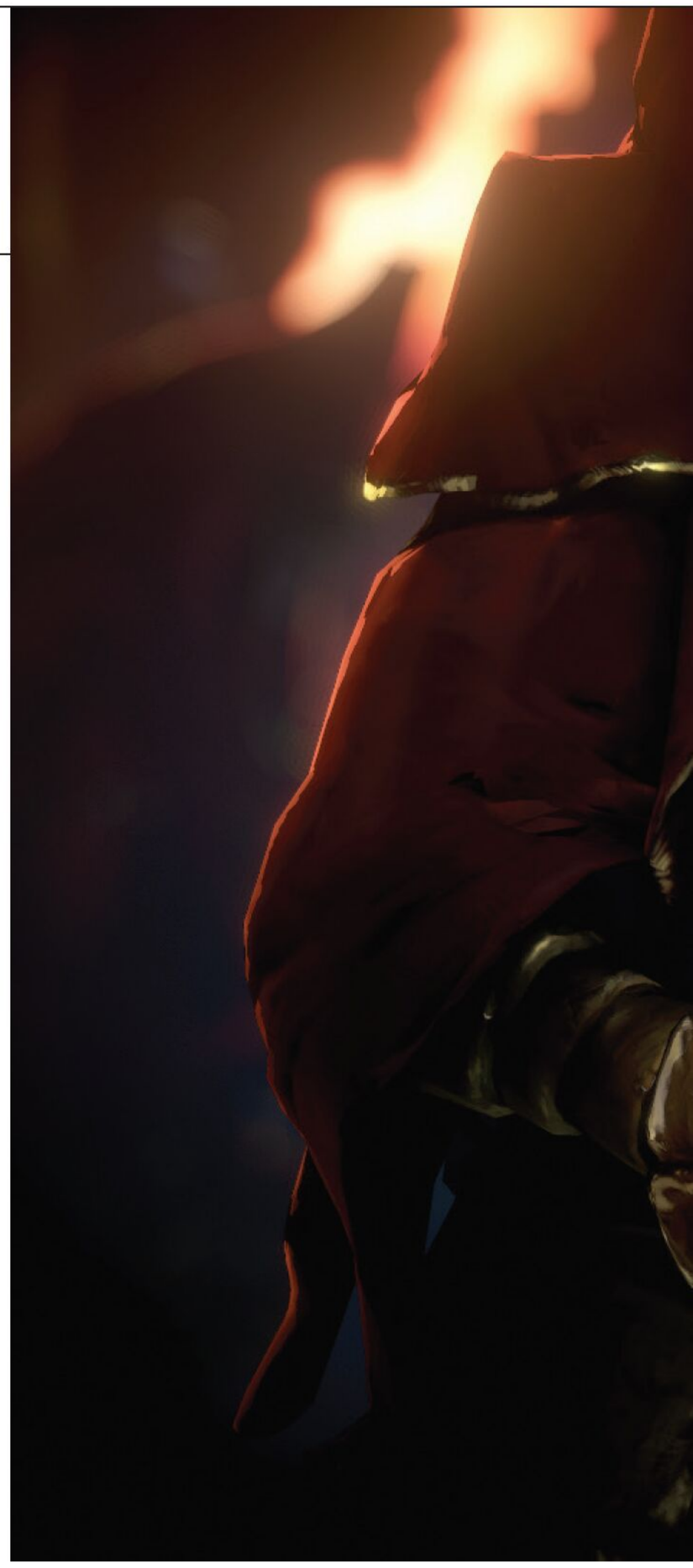
PLAYED IT

CRAFTING A BUILD

When balanced right, I think *No Rest for the Wicked*'s emphasis on revisiting old areas and using items you may not like could be a refreshing way to emulate the experience of desperately looking for any advantage you can get in *Dark Souls*. Everyone I know dips back into The

No Rest for the Wicked





Depths to grab the anti-poison shield for the living nightmare that is Blighttown. It's fun to utilise your familiarity with earlier sections of the game for an advantage in later ones and *No Rest for the Wicked* is really close to capturing that.

Luckily, I didn't have to do a lot of backtracking after my repeated deaths. I found a chest with a new sword and a blue-quality ring that raised my equip load so my dodge rolls didn't take an hour to pull off. Loot in *No Rest for the Wicked* is scarce compared to action RPGs like *Diablo*. As these precious items break, you'll be forced to cycle through all the ragged clothes and rusty weapons you find regardless of their quality. Once I levelled up my stats more, collected enough higher quality items, and had the gold to upgrade them at the main city, my build started to take shape. My rings gave me increased movement speed and reduced the stamina cost of my attacks, letting me smash enemies before they could reach me. In ideal scenarios I was significantly more powerful than before, but that didn't last for long.

LUCKILY, I DIDN'T HAVE TO DO A LOT OF BACKTRACKING AFTER MY REPEATED DEATHS

SOULS AND LOOT

I'd need to spend a lot more time with *No Rest for the Wicked* to fully understand how it balances incremental upgrades in a world where all your equipment is fleeting. I suspect you won't ever be able to rely on one set of gear to carry you through the game. I appreciate being forced to work with what I've got, though, because, just like the backtracking, gaining a familiarity with various weapons and armour types will help you in the long run.

No Rest for the Wicked manages to find a satisfying middle-ground between a full Soulslike and a loot game. The beauty of its setting and its importance to your progress through it grounds it in a way that could resonate pretty well with a story that is clearly hinting at the nature of an island that regrows at an abnormal rate. I'm fully in on a Soulslike that has the ambition – per its Steam page – to reinvent the genre, even if I think that's putting it strongly. I can see the vision and am eager to see where it ends up.

No Rest for the Wicked is available right now on Steam. The Early Access version includes the first chapter of the game, and Moon Studios plans to add features like PvP and co-op down the line. It currently doesn't have a projected release date, but the developer said it'll narrow that down as it goes along.

Tyler Colp

The game is set on the dramatic island of Sacra.

Better gear means more options for lethal builds.

ABOVE: Your type of equipped armour determines your combat moveset.

LEFT: Like a true Soulslike, the game's locations can be labyrinthine.

Crown Wars: The Black Prince

ABOVE: Psst! Behind you!

RIGHT: Making a dramatic entrance is always a good thing.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
May 2024	Artefacts Studio	Nacon	s.team/a/1658920

CROWN WARS: THE BLACK PRINCE

Tactical medieval combat with a gory edge

XCOM, but make it medieval. This could be *Xth-century COM*, except it's set in the 1300s. *Crown Wars* takes tactical combat with a squad of distinctive characters, adds base-building in the form of an entire fortified village, and makes thoughtful additions to the formula that key in to its setting.

A council meets, presumably in secret, but their security measures must be off as the castle is attacked and it's left to a curious group of warriors, one wearing antlers, to hold back the encroaching enemy while the councillors burn documents. Luckily, it's the tutorial, so heavily armoured lady knight Louise can make bloody one-hit kills with her warhammer while you get to grips with action points and the movement system.

Being somewhat more traditional in its weaponry options than plasma rifles and frost grenades, much of *Crown Wars*' combat takes place at melee distances. Your choice of weapon, therefore, can change the way you can attack your foes. Choose an axe and you can push your enemy back, a sword will go through armour more easily, and longer weapons such as halberds can be waved around to keep soldiers at a distance. The squad quickly acquires two archers, one of whom brings grenades in the form of alchemical flasks that burst over a wide area and can cause damage over time. There's also a dog, the best friend of the antlered character, who moves independently and can perform a team-up attack with his master.

Setting things on fire remains a great way of causing damage.

LADY KNIGHT LOUISE CAN MAKE BLOODY ONE-HIT KILLS WITH HER WARHAMMER

DEFENDER OF THE CROWN

Cover and overwatch are both present, though the latter is less effective when you're covering just a single square – enemies routinely dance around it and attack from another direction. You also gain additional arrow accuracy from occupying the high ground, and later on there's considerable customisation of the game's six classes, including mixing weapon types across operatives.

Then there's the base-building layer, which sees logistics and the building and upgrading of facilities come into play. It's not exactly like kitting out the Avenger in *XCOM 2* – your stronghold revolves around its great hall, from where you view a strategic map and send squads to battles, while other buildings within the curtain wall can be added once you start winning fights. Levelling these up improves both your great hall and your standing among the local warlords.

This is a game that opens with a vista of a burning church, and three people hanging from a tree. Two are upside down, while a fourth is on the ground and being eaten by ravens. It has some blood-soaked kill animations – that can be skipped with a switch in the options – and is not afraid to get into the nitty and especially gritty of its setting. After the battle of Poitiers in 1356, French king Jean II lost to an English force commanded by Edward, The Black Prince and was captured.

PLAYED IT

Out of this Artefacts Studio has spun battles and missions that suit its small-squad combat. Your group of five tools up and infiltrates churches and towns, teams up to defeat powerful religious zealots, takes over mounted crossbows for harder-hitting attacks, and proves the old adage that if you can take a bear into combat with you, then you absolutely should take a bear into combat with you.

Crown Wars offers an interesting variation on the *XCOM* formula, but it will need to couple this with a compelling story and deep tactical choices to drag players away from the fight against the aliens.

Ian Evenden

KVLT

ABOVE: Dammit, I'm an occultist, not a dentist!

RIGHT: Squiddy crystals like these can power up your weapons.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
TBA	Evil Guinea Pig	Evil Guinea Pig	evilguineapig.com

KVLT

That is not dead which can eternal shoot Nazis in corridors

Perhaps taking titular inspiration from Robert Eggars, *KVLT* has been kvltivated in a kvlture of grim first-person shooters filled with Nazis and cosmic horrors. In other words, PC gaming. It's a beautiful day in 1945, and you are a horrible occultist. Time to start shooting things like it's *Wolfenstein* all over again.

It begins, as so many things do, in some tunnels. You're presented with some backstory involving crystals, and read some notes the bad guys have helpfully left laying around that refer to mysterious creatures and disappearing comrades. Then you press forward looking for something to shoot.

When you eventually meet them, the Nazis are kind of hilarious. Not only are they keen on sighting down their rifles and standing near red explosive barrels while on guard duty in a dark mine, but when you get a group of them up close they run at you with synchronised animations. The game is currently in an early playable state, and there are bound to be some problems – having the run/walk switch and the torch bound to the same (remappable) button is particularly egregious – but these don't get in the way of the game's atmosphere, which has a heavy *Wolfenstein* feel – specifically the 2009 reboot of the game, as the textures in *KVLT* can look low-res even with all graphics settings on Epic.

The mixture of World War II and occultism remains a potent one, and the mines are littered with the evidence of an experiment gone awry. Not only have enemy soldiers been turned into zombies, but weird floating things with too many legs save your progress as you pass them. The place is a complete health and safety nightmare, with sudden drops to instant death – and to more mysterious glowing things – around every corner.

THE MIXTURE OF WORLD WAR II AND OCCULTISM REMAINS A POTENT ONE

A SHOT IN THE DARK

Lazar, the player character, is initially armed with a strange sort of pistol that looks like a Luger with some interesting attachments, and despite ignoring the Wehrmacht rifles and useful axes scattered around goes on to pick up an SMG and a shotgun, including one that appears to have a human spine attached. He's also capable of punching, which naturally comes in handy when he encounters wooden packing crates.

The pistol's attachments give it surprising power, as a hit from it is enough to make a Nazi explode, and when they're running at you in formation it's possible to kill two with a lucky shot. Lazar is a bit fragile, and will go down fairly quickly if cornered, but has a shield spell to hand – with others available to unlock – while the Nazis have stocked the mine with plentiful first aid kits, and he can regain health from his kills.

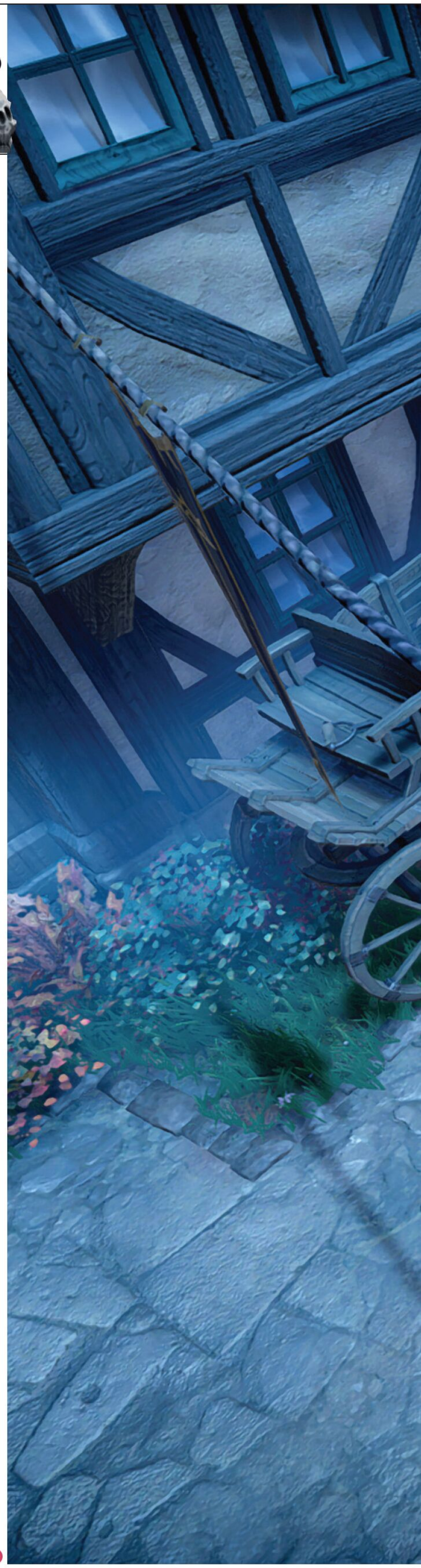
PLAYED IT

He also has occult sight, which can reveal the way forward when a fissure appears uncrossable. Rather than linking these eldritch powers to a veil dimension, as Raven Software did in the later *Wolfenstein* games, Evil Guinea Pig – a studio from Argentina and not a phrase to put into Google Image Search – has chosen to go for cosmic horror, with a Cthulhu mythos element providing the madness-inducing, indescribable, otherworldly portents of doom (but not *Doom*) instead.

There are a lot of common shooter tropes on display in *KVLT*, from the weapon choices to the mix of horror and action to the whole damn setup. The game also remains resolutely singleplayer only, at least in its current incarnation. The demo of the game available on Steam has recently had an overhaul, with additions and fixes but there's still no sign of a confirmed release date.

Ian Evenden

V Rising



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
May 8, 2024

DEVELOPER
Stunlock Studios

PUBLISHER
Stunlock Studios

LINK
playvrising.com

V RISING

A vampire-themed genre mashup leaves Early Access

V *Rising* was something of a viral hit when it went into Early Access in 2022. All the biggest streamers were playing it, then it topped the Steam charts and was the hot game of the moment. Two years later, its Early Access journey is coming to an end, with big plans for the 1.0 release.

At first glance, *V Rising* looks like an ARPG, with a camera view, HUD and gameplay similar to the likes of *Diablo*. But once you get past the first moments, it becomes clear this is not your typical ARPG, and is instead a survival crafting game in which you collect resources, build your castle and increase your power level before taking on some of the biggest foes in the vampire world, and that's before you add in the possibility of fighting other players.

It's a stark difference from Stunlock Studios' previous game, *Battlerite*, a 2v2 or 3v3 MOBA that clearly inspired the new *League of Legends* Arena mode. That meant the dev team had to learn a lot over the course of development and Early Access.

"Developing an action survival game was a new challenge for Stunlock Studios when we first started, and in many ways still is," says Jeremy Bearson, community manager at Stunlock. "It's our first game of this type, and we're only just now getting close to our full release. There's been a lot of hard-won experience earned through seeing how players interact with *V Rising*, getting their feedback, and getting to act on it."

COLLECT RESOURCES, BUILD YOUR CASTLE AND INCREASE YOUR POWER LEVEL

NEW INFO

EARLY ACCESS LEARNINGS

When *V Rising* launched into Early Access it had the bones of something great, but it was clear there was still quite a long way to go before it was ready for a polished full release. Perhaps the best way to describe it was clunky. The UI wasn't great which made managing your inventory or item storage irritating and collecting the resources you needed felt a bit like a grind without custom server settings to boost the amounts you got. Then there was disappointment with how upgrades or different abilities were locked behind fairly linear progression systems that felt out of place in an open-world survival game.

These were the first things the team wanted to address with the 1.0 launch. While there was a lot of content they wanted to work on, with Bearson mentioning that *V Rising* had "potentially infinite scope," they knew that they had to nail these basics before players would stick around for more late-game content.

"Over the course of Early Access we've pulled off a massive lift in the overall quality of the game from systems, to flow, to appearance and optimisation," says Bearson. "In 1.0 we have a lot of effort put into improving storage management and making it easier, more organised, and satisfying to interact with. That was a direct result of trying to make players happy who have had difficulties with that in the past. Additions of more weapons were direct responses to player requests, as well as the ability to upgrade legendary weapons. Even the changes to spell progression are largely because players expressed a strong desire to have more options for diversity in being able to take control over their own journey through the game."

SPOOKY NEW CONTENT

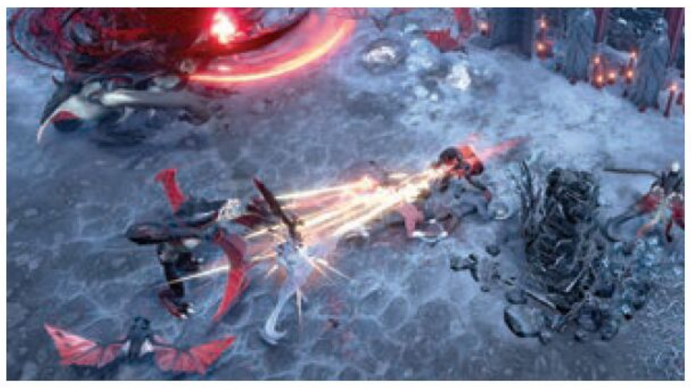
The first thing you notice jumping into the 1.0 update are the improvements to the UI and inventory management, so it's safe to say Stunlock nailed that goal. That meant it could start focusing on adding some new content to round out *V Rising*, with the headline new addition being the Ruins of Mortium, an end-game area that

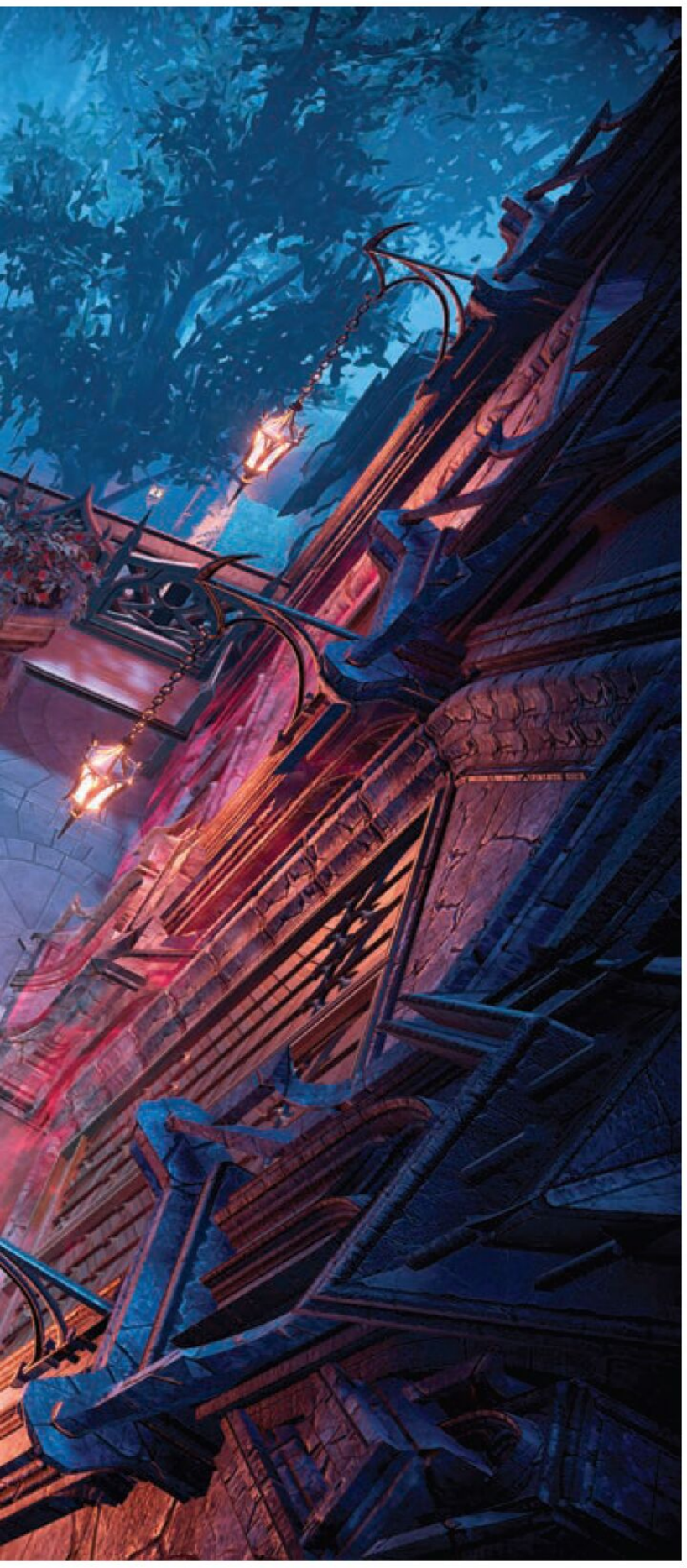
V Rising

RIGHT: You might meet some familiar faces on your travels.

BELOW: The beginnings of my epic abode.

Look at all that loot!





should keep you playing for hours after you have unlocked all your abilities and perfected your castle.

"The Ruins of Mortium plays a bit differently than the other zones, more focused around the dynamic events than being a progression area that you go and really inhabit," explains Bearson. "It's an unfriendly place, unwelcoming and without room to settle. Instead, you dive in to participate in the war events, cutting down active rituals and gathering the materials left over as a side effect of the botched magic so that you can unlock more ancient vampire secrets and create the means to fully master your vampire journey."

The Ruins are home to one of the most requested additions to *V Rising*, Dracula and his Legion of Noctum. The world's most famous vampire is looking to make his return, sending out his legion to gather blood, but that might get in your way a little, so it's best to go take them down when you can. However, that won't be easy and you might have to team up with some other vampires to keep Dracula at bay.

"As Dracula's forces, known as the Legion of Noctum, commence dark rituals to summon terrifying beings from the shadow realm, events will unfold," reveals Bearson. "These otherworldly horrors are rare in Vardoran, and fighting them in masses makes the encounters in this region truly unique. At the climax of each event, you'll confront blood memories, special boss fights reminiscent of earlier V Bloods but reimagined in the context of being fought alongside this new breed of foes."

HOME SWEET HOME

The other major overhaul coming with the 1.0 release is to castle building, something that proved very divisive among players. Some loved the ability to build up a castle throughout the game, going from a wooden shack that barely resembled a building to an epic gothic mansion that wouldn't look out of place next to Hogwarts. Others, myself included, found it a bit of a grind to keep improving it and were more than happy with just an area of the map that could house all the crafting benches needed to get better gear. Fortunately, a lot of the complaints players had have been addressed, with changes to default resource amounts and further customisation options in server settings.

"For 1.0, we've enhanced the overall castle-building experience," says Bearson. "[We've done this] by increasing resource yields, upgrading crafting stations for faster production and adding more cosmetics. We've also expanded customisation options such as attaching two decorations to a single pillar and effortless placement of wallpaper."

But it's not just about making life easier when it comes to building your castle, the goal was also to make it a place you actually want to be, rather than just somewhere you have to go to do crafting and store your stuff. You can now sit on furniture you build, hang out in your castle and listen to music, making it a place that feels more like a home than a warehouse. They aren't game-changing additions, but it's a nice addition nonetheless.

THE OTHER MAJOR OVERHAUL COMING WITH THE 1.0 RELEASE IS TO CASTLE BUILDING

A FAMILIAR FACE

Rounding out the 1.0 update is a collaboration with Konami that will see legendary *Castlevania* character Simon Belmont join *V Rising* as he hunts you and your fellow vampires with his iconic whip. It's one of the most natural crossovers ever and being included in the base game is a nice touch so everyone can enjoy it.

"We've actually been in touch with Konami for a while now, and it's been a blast working with them," says Bearson. "While I won't presume to speak for Konami, I can say that they brought a ton of passion and attention to detail to the table. Every time we got an asset greenlit, it was a huge rush of excitement and pride from our end. We've got a bunch of die-hard *Castlevania* fans here at Stunlock, and their love for the series has really rubbed off on *V Rising*. It was like the stars aligned for this crossover event, it just felt so right!"

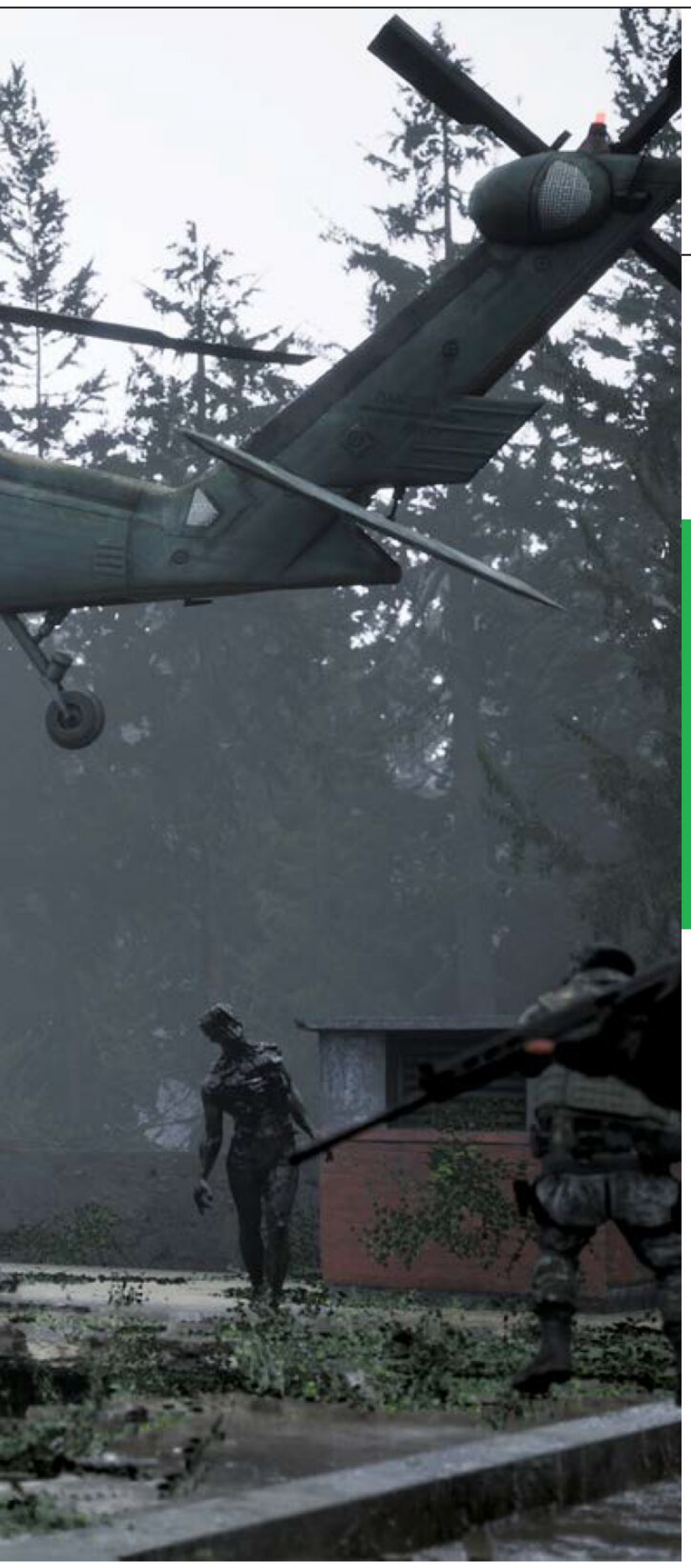
All of this is the culmination of a long but worthwhile Early Access period that has seen the direction of *V Rising* change based on community feedback. I've only played the first few hours of the 1.0 update, but I can already say that this is a massive improvement over the Early Access version purely from how easy it is to play and the removal of a lot of the jank it initially had. I'm excited to try the rest of the game, as it now feels like it can finally deliver on the promise it shows.

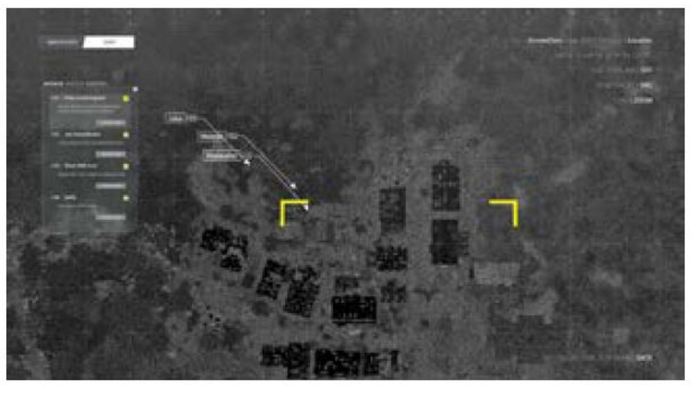
Mike Stubbs

Beautiful Light

ABOVE: In the business, we call this a hot LZ.

RIGHT: Red glowsticks mark teammates.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2025	Deep Worlds SA	Deep Worlds SA	deepworlds.studio

BEAUTIFUL LIGHT

This SCP-ish extraction shooter is already terrifying me

It's not hard to see *Beautiful Light*'s influences: the extraction shooter owes a debt to horror fan film SCP: Overlord, but in play the objective-based extraction shooter plays a little like *Hunt: Showdown*, as several teams compete to get their hands on an artefact and hoof it to extraction before you get mauled by the numerous mutants.

This always starts with your team finding one of the laptops to generate your own keycard. Players can generate a keycard at any time, but it only works for them. Hacking is done in real-time on the actual computer screen and my teammates, devs from *Beautiful Light* creator Deep Worlds, tell me it's based on a real programming language. It's lightweight but still feels like a real achievement as gunfire rattles in the background and violence – either actual or implied – is constantly just a few seconds away.

Then you push towards the high-security facility, fairly safe in the knowledge that every other player on the map will be making their way there or, worse, are already secreted inside one of the facility's blind spots or dark corridors. Firefights ensue, and are instantly lethal: a clean round to the head or a burst of gunfire to the body will end most battles.

We played with three teams of four, while the finished game is aiming to include six squads in each match, but there was still plenty of fighting. In the early phase, everyone is searching for their nearest laptop, and there are enough of them scattered about the place that teams felt quite distant, but inside the facility there's close-quarters combat the whole way through as everyone comes together for the same prize.

PvP combat with military weapons in run-down urban environments will sound like a similar experience to its extraction shooter cousin *Escape From Tarkov*, but Deep Worlds is describing the game as an objective-based extraction shooter in which loot is secondary to the artefact itself, and this gives it a distinct feel.

A CLEAN ROUND TO THE HEAD OR A BURST OF GUNFIRE TO THE BODY WILL END BATTLES

TABLET TROUBLES

It's much simpler to pick up at this stage than many other extraction shooters too. A tablet slapped to your wrist gives you an instant glimpse at the map with a press of the tab key, and ghostlike dots highlight your team, making keeping track of everyone easier than several other games in the genre.

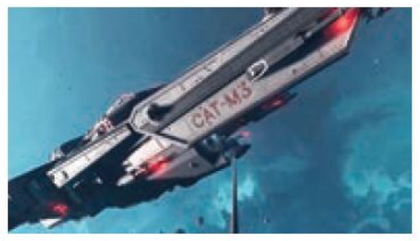
Of course, if that doesn't appeal there's *Beautiful Light*'s twist in the tale. After playing a couple of raids against players, the developers nudged me towards going hands on with the Anomaly, a player-controlled monster that can scuttle through vents and climb any surface. With a click of the left mouse button you can lunge at high speed, while a click of the right will have you sticking to any surface like an industrial-strength adhesive, letting you move rapidly around the map high above the eyes of curious enemies. In the open map this is occasionally terrifying, an unease born out of hearing your enemy without being able to get a clear line of sight. Descend into the darkened facility and it's scary in a whole other way as the anomaly can burst out of a vent or drop down from an inky corner, causing players to erupt into panic, gunfire spraying the walls.

PLAYED IT

If *Beautiful Light* can keep this blend of horror, military sim and accessible gunplay, as the game adds more content and beefs up for its planned 2025 Early Access release, it might be onto a winner. Right now though, there's more than enough to be excited about, and it's not hard to imagine the game reverberating with players who are craving something a bit different in a well-colonised genre.

Jake Tucker

Jump Ship



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2024 (Early Access)	Keepsake Games	Keepsake Games	jumpshipgame.com

JUMP SHIP

Command a spaceship with friends and take on the galaxy

Filip Coulianos' first vision for *Jump Ship* was "the ultimate Han Solo and Chewbacca simulator". The game has changed a lot since the first prototypes he made many years ago, but it still retains a lot of that core fantasy even in its very early current form. Let's find out more.

Jump Ship is being built by a small team of 12 people at Keepsake Games, a studio founded by five university friends who just happen to have worked across Stockholm's biggest studios for the past ten or more years. With veterans who have made games at the likes of DICE, Mojang, Hazelight and Toca Boca this is as close to an all-star team as you can get, and it shows in a game that feels closer to one made by a team of hundreds rather than 12. But having a smaller team has its advantages.

"The triple-A studios, we have all worked there and kind of learned from their mistakes," says Coulianos, who is the game director on *Jump Ship* and a Keepsake co-founder. "All of us are super hands-on. I am the game director, but I program full-time. We have an incredibly flat hierarchy, so if somebody comes up with an idea, we can start implementing it right away. And if someone is really passionate about something, I think they are also the owners of that idea."

This structure has allowed *Jump Ship* to become a game that feels like it does everything. Distilled down to just the basics you and three friends command a spaceship and run around the galaxy engaging in space fights, then land on planets where it becomes a first-person shooter, to complete other missions and find loot. Then there's the ship management, upgrades and the overall journey you are on to add into the mix. It's a lot.

YOU AND THREE FRIENDS COMMAND A SPACESHIP AND RUN AROUND THE GALAXY

PROTECT YOUR SHIP

The most important thing in *Jump Ship* is, unsurprisingly, your ship. If it's destroyed it's game over, almost like a collective health bar for your entire squad, so you'll need to do everything you can to make sure it survives. There are obviously threats from other ships, who you'll likely want to take out before they can do any damage, but sometimes the AI games master who determines if you need more of a challenge in a certain location will throw a meteor shower or another event at you that you need to deal with.

In a portion of my demo that I'm fairly sure wasn't meant to happen as it occurred right at the end as we were about to exit the game, a giant meteor shower started to hit our ship, forcing Coulianos to quickly jump into the pilot's seat and just about position us under a rock formation on the planet for cover.

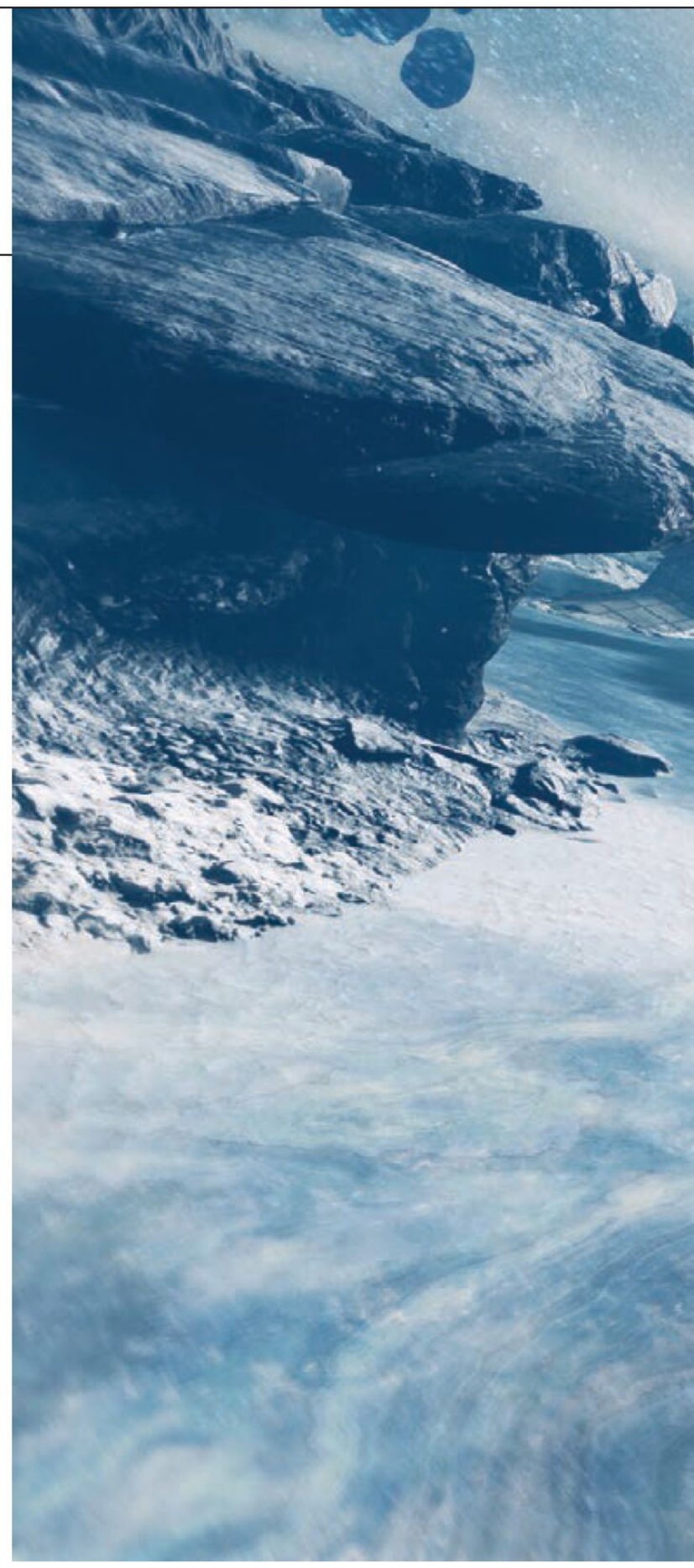
FIRST LOOK

The fact we weren't paying full attention didn't help, but our ship only just made it to cover, with alarms going off all over the place that I imagine we would have needed to fix had we kept playing. If a fire breaks out on the ship one of the crew will need to grab a fire extinguisher to make sure it gets put out or fix any damage that enemy hits may have caused. While there is only one pilot seat, there's still a lot to be done while in the air, and that's before you even think about standing on the outside of the ship or even jetpacking off to fly around yourself.

TAKING THE WHEEL

Flying around with your jetpack, or even just standing on the outside of the ship as it flies through the sky, is a cool experience, but the seat you'll really want to be in is the pilot's. As someone who is honestly terrible at any kind of flying in games, a massive wave of nerves spread through my body when the team suggested I take the pilot seat and get us

Jump Ship



out of the location we had just looted. With zero info thrown my way on how he controls worked, I was sure I would be crashing into the nearest wall and dooming my crew to a fiery death. But not only did I not crash into the planet, I actually managed to take out all the enemy ships that swarmed our location within a few minutes and after 20 seconds or so of being in the air, I didn't even have to think about the controls.

BELLS AND WHISTLES

"[The controls are] something that's been iterated on, the feel and all that stuff has been worked on for quite some time," says Coulianos after I told him how easy it felt. "I've been looking at a lot of games and one of my absolute favourites is actually *Freelancer*, this old old old space shooter game from the early 2000s. It's a game where they had a really clever way of doing things, I think it was like the first kind of space game where you had something that would compare to a modern control scheme today. We looked at a bunch of other games but I think *Freelancer* was one of the main ones and then we adapted that to a modern control scheme and spent a lot of time making sure that it feels responsive."

Coulianos also credits co-op platformer *It Takes Two*, a game he worked on, as another important reason why the flying controls feel so natural. During that game's development, he says, he learnt a lot about how to make a game feel snappy and responsive in different ways, revealing that *Jump Ship* mimics a lot of techniques he learnt at Hazelight. "It's a lot of bells and whistles," said Coulianos. "Like, how the camera is behaving, is essentially 90% of why you actually feel like the controls are good."

ON THE GROUND

When you are on the ground, things are a little less impressive but still great fun. *Jump Ship* is a competent FPS but it feels like there is still work to do to make it truly satisfying. With an SMG in my hands and a horde of security robots to take down, I easily blasted through everything that came my way, but it was hard to tell how much of an impact I was having overall. It could be that we were shooting robots and the only impact was reducing a health bar rather than bullets interacting with the target, but it feels like it needs something to make combat more satisfying.

What was much more fun was just flying around in my jetpack suit. You can do this pretty much anywhere, be it by launching off the side of your ship while it's in mid-air, or by simply doing a double jump from the ground and taking off. In some closed-off areas, all of which are handcrafted, it won't be much use, but if you are searching for where the loot is, or have a combat encounter in a more open area, this will likely be a useful tool and, much like flying the ship, it's fun and easy to grasp.

MAKE EVERYTHING FUN

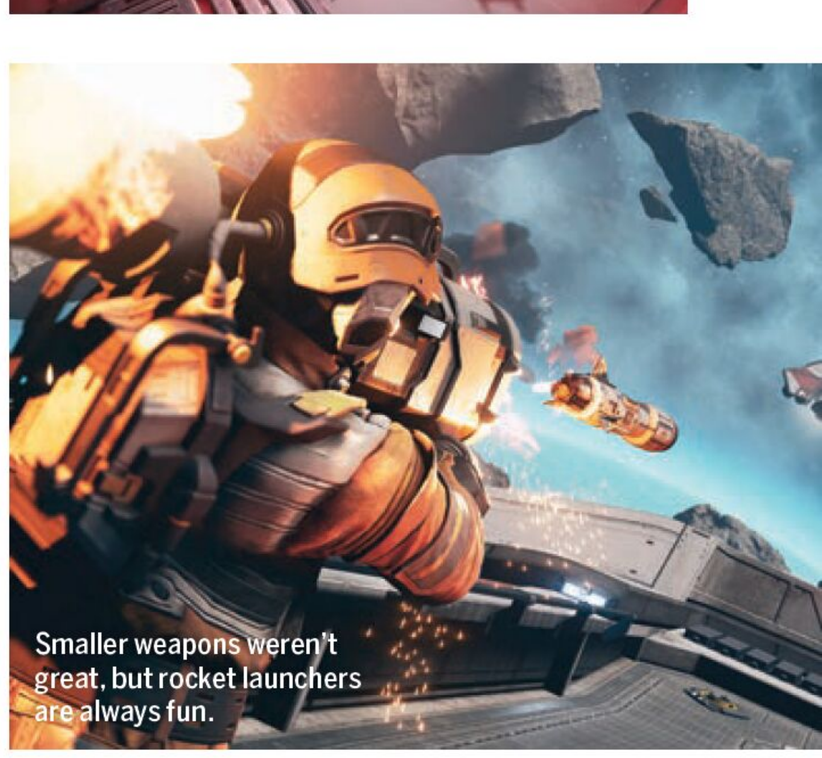
What is clear is that everything in *Jump Ship* has been made with having fun in mind. The jetpack and ability to stand outside the ship while it flies seem to be a response to three people not having much to do when the pilot is in space combat and doing well, as does the putting out fires and physically having to run around the ship to solve problems.

Then there's the ship's engineer panel, which is almost like a puzzle with you having to attach different power bricks to a circuit board to decide what areas of the ship you want to prioritise. If the captain needs more power to the engines, you'll need to quickly switch that block in to make it happen. In Coulianos' early versions that he made before founding Keepsake Games, this was all done in a menu with lots of numbers that was very technical and a bit boring for most players. "It was just numbers shuffling around, and that's not very exciting," says Coulianos.

This is the direction *Jump Ship* is going. There are the bones of a detailed space sim in here somewhere, but a lot of the more technical aspects of the game Coulianos was making for himself have been changed to be more accessible and fun. So far this is a good thing, as I really wanted to go out on another mission or figure out how to fix up the ship after the impromptu meteor shower as my demo ended. My concern is how long that feeling will last without becoming repetitive, but with early access still a way out and no set full launch window, there is a lot of time to make sure that doesn't happen.

Mike Stubbs

EVERYTHING IN JUMP SHIP HAS BEEN MADE WITH HAVING FUN IN MIND



Smaller weapons weren't great, but rocket launchers are always fun.

ABOVE: This is where the unexpected meteor shower hit during my demo.

LEFT: If you could fit everything that can happen in a fight into an image, this is it.

Blockbuster Inc

ABOVE: The ancient Egyptian rom-com of our dreams.

RIGHT: An efficient layout minimises wasted time.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
June 6

DEVELOPER
Super Sly Fox

PUBLISHER
Ancient Forge

LINK
blockbusterincgame.com

BLOCKBUSTER INC

A lights, camera, action adventure

Back in 2005 Lionhead Studios released *The Movies*, a game about running a movie studio that was pretty good. I mention it only because *Blockbuster Inc* (no relation to the venerable VHS rental chain) triggers a serious rush of nostalgia for Molyneux's game.

A 'Prologue' version of *Blockbuster Inc* is available on Steam, and drops you into the comfortable shoes of a movie studio head, tasked with making films, nurturing talent, winning awards and making money. It's such a good fit for the tycoon/management game genre that it's surprising that there have been so few imitators since 2005. The prologue starts in 1920 and ends in 1922, giving you remarkably little time to make movies, even by early 20th-century standards.

The interface is reminiscent of *The Sims* or *Two Point Hospital*, and you build up a studio lot by dipping in and out of a build mode that allows you to place different types of room, then connect them with doors and fill them with furniture. You can also choose pre-made rooms for specific functions, which come with all you need.

Apart, that is, for staff. You'll need to hire actors, producers, directors, crew members, catering and maintenance staff plus, most importantly, writers. I hire eight, immediately hit the button to fast forward to the next day, and they all turn up for work at a minute past midnight because I hadn't set a work schedule for them. Clearly, crunch is going to be a big part of the movie-making experience.

SADLY, THE CRITICS ARE NOT KIND TO MY FIRST MOVIE, WHICH SCORES 41

CRITICAL MESS

There's a lot of admin and building to go through before you can start making your first movie, but once you get there you'll choose a budget, genre and a few other parameters for your masterpiece, then plot it out using sliders for things like atmosphere, suspense and gore. So you can make a dialogue-heavy horror film that's got a strong story, or an atmospheric romantic comedy aimed at older people, with blood spurts.

The movie I put into production is called The Hilarious PC Game, and it's a low-budget cyberpunk comedy for general audiences. There's lots of story and suspense, and everyone involved is a complete nobody. What could go wrong?

Progress is slow, probably not helped by my enlightened employment practices, such as a two-hour lunch break (though as I've placed my set and canteen at opposite ends of the compound, my employees spend a lot of that time walking), but eventually a screenplay is written, scenes are filmed, and the whole thing is made in just four days, which I spend with the time accelerated as there's not much else going on. While I'm waiting for it to be released, I get on with making The Righteous Poet, a medieval mystery with, you guessed it, a low budget.

PLAYED IT

Sadly, the critics are not kind to my first movie, which scores 41. "Beautiful premise. Excellent idea. All butchered by PCPP Films Inc's crew... so many mistakes it's barely watchable," says one reviewer, which sounds more like a score in the 30s or high 20s to me. Still, it sells 4,491 tickets on its first day, which just goes to show that some people will watch anything.

It'll be interesting to see how *Blockbuster Inc* develops once you're allowed to play more than two in-game years. Changes in special effects, costumes and movie-making techniques are promised as the decades pass, and real historic events will occur to shake things up. That *The Movies* never got a sequel was a tragedy, so this will fill a significant hole in PC gaming's repertoire.

Ian Evenden

AFTER A DIFFICULT YEAR, **DESTINY 2: THE FINAL SHAPE**

SHAPE OF

HAS A LOT TO PROVE. BUT BUNGIE IS DETERMINED TO

THINGS

END THE SERIES' FIRST SAGA WITH A BANG

TO COME

By Phil Savage

Destiny 2: The Final Shape

In early April, Bungie released a teaser video detailing some of the new features it had planned for *Destiny 2*'s sixth expansion, *The Final Shape*. The reaction from the community was immediate: "We're so back!"

Before that teaser, the mood around *Destiny 2* was decidedly different. The game's last expansion, *Lightfall*, was poorly received. As the penultimate release of *Destiny*'s first saga, its story felt like a sidequest – rushing through poorly explained plot threads that, outside of a couple of important cutscenes, felt inconsequential to the broader narrative. More damaging, arguably, was the way the sandbox had been changed. In an effort to bring challenge back to the game, *Lightfall* brought sweeping nerfs to weapon damage and ability uptime – players were being asked to put in more effort for largely the same reward.

It was a year, I think, that many players realised they had burned out on *Destiny*. The first game released almost ten years ago on consoles, and *Destiny 2* itself has been running since 2017. Across that long history, Bungie has been no stranger to controversy – the difficulties of running a live service game, especially one that is also a big-budget first-person shooter with a focus on co-operative PvE activities, has often led the studio towards solutions that run counter to what the playerbase wants. There is nothing else like *Destiny*, not at the scope and scale that Bungie is making it on. But that means there is no obvious template to follow. For all the great times across that decade, there have been plenty of major missteps too.

ABOVE: I'm already dreading being stuck in a small arena with a whole pack of these guys.

THERE IS NOTHING ELSE LIKE DESTINY, NOT AT THE SCOPE AND SCALE THAT BUNGIE IS MAKING IT

Since *Lightfall*, the game has improved. Subsequent sandbox updates have restored potency to weapons and abilities. Seasonal activities have been more experimental and interesting, and often much more rewarding too. But community sentiment was slow to recover. When *The Final Shape* was first previewed back in August 2023, the response was more muted than for previous expansion reveals. As the culmination of the Light and Darkness saga it was obviously going to be a landmark release, but in terms of the features revealed it felt somewhat underwhelming.

In October 2023, Bungie laid off roughly 100 employees, and in November that year confirmed rumours that *The Final Shape* had been delayed. "This has been one of the most difficult weeks in our studio's history, as we've parted ways with people we respect and admire." Bungie wrote, in a statement on the *Destiny 2* website.

"We want to acknowledge the feedback and concerns you have about *Lightfall* and recent Seasons, as well as your responses to the reveal of *The Final Shape*," the statement continued. "We know we have lost a lot of your trust. *Destiny* needs to surprise and delight. We haven't done this enough and that's going to change."

The vocal element of Bungie's community – spread as it is across subreddits and content creators and Twitter and Discord – can be cynical

PRISMATIC PROFILE

TITAN

Offence is the best defence

The lack of Banner of War is a clear statement of purpose from Bungie. The Strand aspect is the centrepiece of the strongest build in the game, and Prismatic doesn't have it. Instead, Bungie picked Drengr's Lash, which creates a suspending wave when you use your class ability. It's solid, and could pair well with Arc's Thruster ability – a replacement for the barricades that trades defence for mobility. You'll be able to thrust forward into a pack of enemies, suspending them and following up with a big damage melee. Prismatic is all about taking these lesser-picked options and building something new.

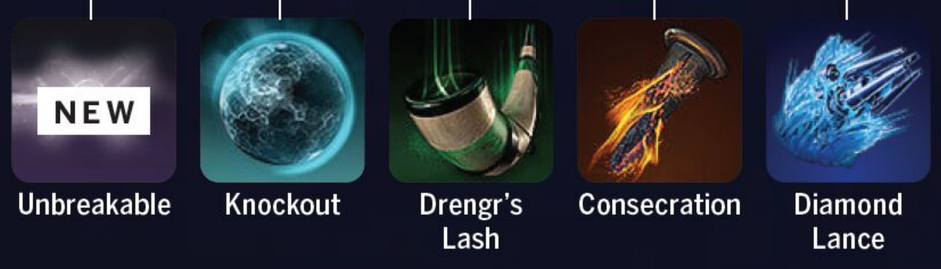
For instance, I'm a big Consecration fan – slamming down into a pack of enemies for massive ignition damage is always fun – but it's always been hard to justify in a Solar build. Here, though, you can pair it with the Frenzied Blade melee to get three Consecration charges. You can then buff them up further with Glacier Grenades for extra shatter damage and the Knockout aspect for even more damage. And if all that wasn't enough, as everything around you dies in a wave of fire, ice and electricity, you'll start regenerating health.

SUPER

MELEE

GRENADE

ASPECTS



TRANSCENDENT GRENADE

Electrified Snare
A mix of Strand and Arc that detonates in a suspending burst. Suspended enemies chain jolt to nearby targets.

CLASS ABILITY

MOVEMENT

PRISMATIC PROFILE

HUNTER

Made you look

Given how good Combination Blow already is on the Arc subclass, Prismatic Hunter could be ridiculous. Instead of relying on the Assassin's Cowl exotic helmet to get invisibility between punches, you can let the Stylish Executioner aspect take care of it instead. By using Winter's Shroud as your second aspect, you'll apply the slow debuff every time you use Gambler's Dodge. And this version of Stylish Executioner will make you invisible by defeating an enemy inflicted by any debuff. The loop is the same: punch, dodge, punch, dodge, punch, dodge, repeat. But now your dodges will be slowing enemies, and your punches will either make you invisible or, if you're already invisible, weaken your target. Just two dodges will freeze an enemy, causing them to take extra melee damage.

Full Combination Blow stacks should also buff the damage of Grapple's melee attack. It's such a synergistic combo that I worry about the viability of other aspects here. Hopefully once Prismatic is out and in players' hands, some more unusual builds will come to light. Gunpowder Gamble is crying out for some love.

SUPER

Storm's Edge | Golden Gun: Marksman | Silence and Squall | Silkstrike | Shadowshot: Deadfall

MELEE

Combination Blow | Knife Trick | Withering Blade | Threaded Spike | Snare Bomb

CLASS ABILITY

Marksman's Dodge | Gambler's Dodge | Acrobat's Dodge

MOVEMENT

High Jump | Strafe Jump | Triple Jump | Blink

TRANSCENDENT GRENADE

Hailfire Spike
Attaches to surfaces or targets for Stasis and Solar damage, slowing, igniting and creating scorch cyclones.

GRENADE

Arcbolt Grenade | Swarm Grenade | Duskfield Grenade | Grapple | Magnetic Grenade

ASPECTS

Ascension | Gunpowder Gamble | Winter's Shroud | Threaded Specter | Stylish Executioner

and quick to anger. Mollifying it must feel like a thankless task, but ultimately, as fierce and voracious as its criticism can be, it comes from a place of wanting *Destiny 2* to be good; of wanting the game to meet the potential that it shows. And when Bungie gives these players a reason to be excited, the community's enthusiasm can be infectious too. With the April teaser, the enthusiasm was back. *Destiny* was surprising and delighting again.

So what changed?

"We really really wanted *The Final Shape* to be the thing that players deserved after ten years of *Destiny*," Cat Macedo, project lead for *The Final Shape*, tells me. "We wanted to have a really good ending of the Light and Darkness saga, and the story that we wanted to tell. And we wanted to make sure that the experience was as polished as possible. And so what the extra time allowed us to do is to make sure that we were spending more time and iteration on the things that we really wanted to deliver to players."

One of the things that the delay helped Bungie to develop further was Prismatic, the surprise new subclass launching with *The Final Shape*. Subclasses in *Destiny 2* are loosely themed around different elements and ideas – each made up of specific keywords related to that concept. Solar, on the Light side, is the domain of fire and burning, but also of healing and damage buffs. On the other end of the spectrum, Stasis is a Darkness subclass based on ice and the concept of control – freezing enemies in place and creating ice crystals that can be shattered for area-of-effect damage.

PRISMATIC IS DIFFERENT. PRISMATIC, PUT SIMPLY, IS EVERYTHING

Prismatic is different. Prismatic, put simply, is everything.

ANY COLOUR YOU LIKE

"So Prismatic has an interesting story," says Macedo. "With *The Final Shape*, when we were doing the concept for the expansion, one of the things was, 'What is the thing that we can give players that is the most representative of this journey we've been on?' Especially since *Beyond Light* when we started building the Darkness. And one of the things that we kept falling into was, we really want this to be like the ultimate expression of a Guardian – of wielding both Light and Darkness. And how can we make sure that we can do that without completely breaking the videogame? It's a big set of challenges."

With Prismatic, you'll be able to mix and match various parts of each existing subclass. At the most basic level, that means you can take a Solar grenade and an Arc melee ability and run them at the same time. On a more interesting level, you can also mix up aspects – the powerful effects that define a class's build.

Devour is one of the Void subclass's most potent keywords – restoring health and grenade energy for every kill. Warlocks are the kings of devouring, thanks to the Feed the Void aspect, which activates it on ability kills. With Prismatic, though, Warlocks also have access to more powerful abilities like Solar's Incinerator Snap melee, making activation easier than ever. Throw in the Stasis aspect Bleak Watcher, which turns your grenade into turrets that can slow and eventually freeze enemies, and you've built a

ABOVE: Will the new Solar super finally persuade Warlocks to stop running Well of Radiance?

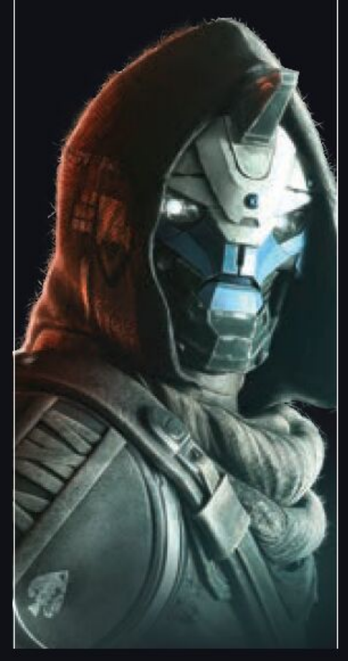
combination that's greater than the sum of its subclass parts.

"I perfectly remember the first playtest we did with Prismatic was just so eye opening – because of the way it was so fun," says Macedo. "Me as a Titan, I just went in and was playing with Strand and Solar and I was like, 'This is all I've wanted. This feels so good and so broken in all the right ways.'"

If I was to sum up the immediate reaction to Prismatic following the April teaser, I'd use a single word: disbelief. The community was excited at how overpowered it all seemed – had Bungie really thrown class balance completely out of the window? In fact, it hadn't. In a deep dive posted a few days after the trailer, the limitations became clear. Not all of the abilities and aspects of the core subclasses will be available in Prismatic. Titans won't be able to pick the ridiculously strong Banner of War aspect. Warlocks won't be able to run the Well of Radiance super. For each category of buildcrafting Prismatic will offer one choice from each element.

"There are a couple of things we really wanted to make sure that we got right," says Macedo. "One of them is to make sure that all the other subclasses are still viable and have their space in the game. We didn't want to invalidate that, and that was a big risk. The other thing is to make sure the classes still maintain their own identity even within the Prismatic subclass. That's the choice that we went through on what atoms – like aspects and fragments and abilities – we were going to enable to make sure that it's still the ultimate representation of being a Titan, a Hunter and a Warlock."

ABOVE: The fireteam's all here, and doing poses for the camera.



FOR EACH CATEGORY OF BUILDCRAFTING PRISMATIC WILL OFFER ONE CHOICE FROM EACH ELEMENT

As someone pretty deep into *Destiny 2* buildcrafting, the limitations placed on Prismatic arguably make it more interesting – not invalidating the work I've already put in to create builds across Solar, Void, Arc, Strand and Stasis, but opening up new possibilities that pick from parts of all five. And those limitations are offset by two new pieces of kit that round out the Prismatic subclass. The first is Transcendence, a new effect exclusive to Prismatic. You'll fill up your two Transcendence meters by doing damage with abilities and weapons tied to the Light and Darkness respectively. When both bars are full, you can activate Transcendence for a new grenade ability – specific to each class – as well as greater damage resistance and a weapon damage buff. It sounds like a second, mini super that will be perfect for getting yourself out of a tight spot mid-fight.

The second is more of an unknown, but has the ability to make a big difference to buildcrafting in *Destiny 2*. With a Prismatic subclass equipped, you'll be able to use a new category of exotic armour that replaces your class item. These armour pieces draw effects from other exotic armour, but have two active at the same time. "We were so excited with the idea when the teams came up with it," says Macedo.

"We really want to push the boundaries of what we've done in *Destiny* and, I mean... this is the moment. We're going inside the Traveler, we're defeating the ultimate boss. How are we going to be doing this? What tools should we have

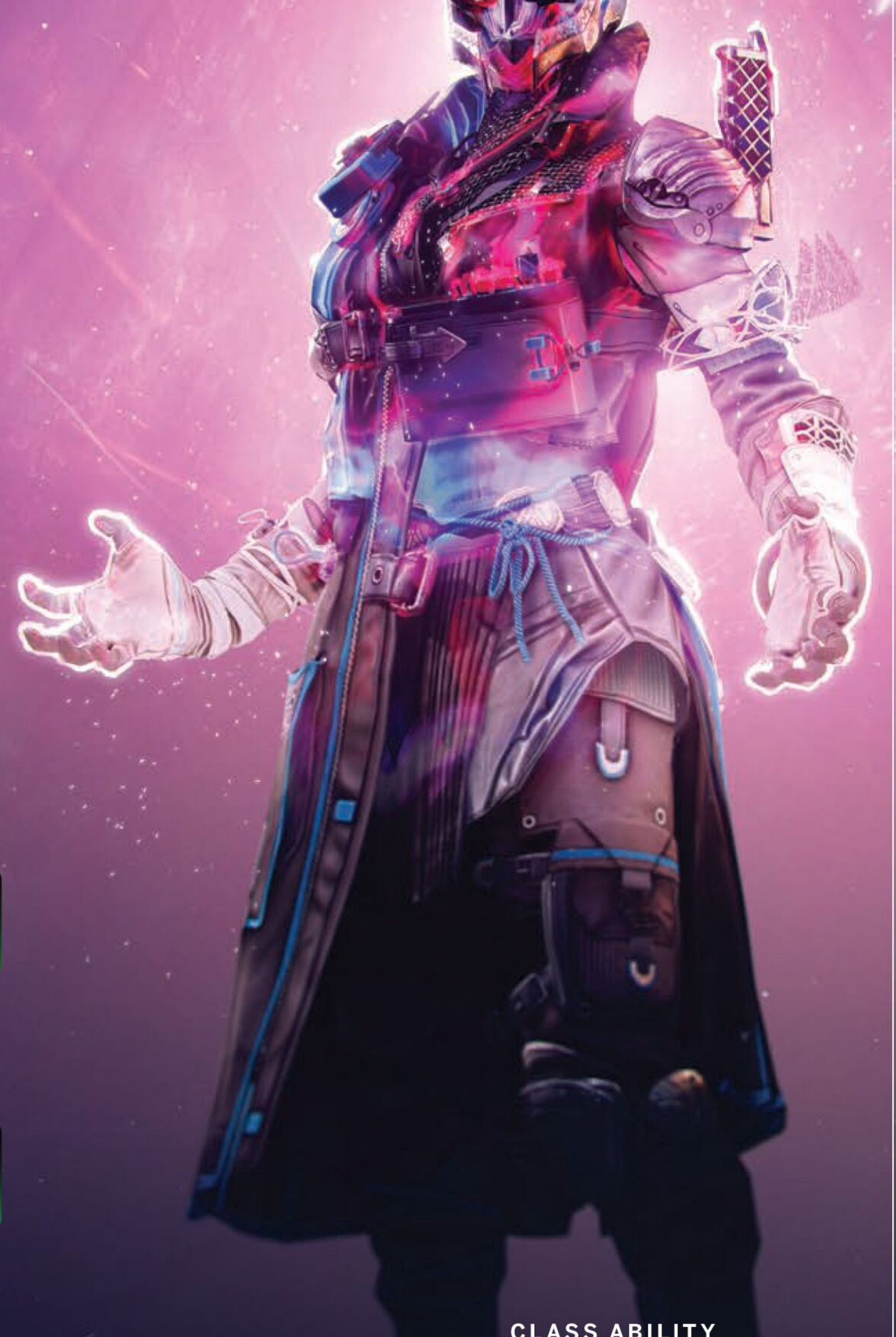
PRISMATIC PROFILE

WARLOCK

Space magic goes brrr

The Warlock's Prismatic kit leans into the class's love of summoning magical pals to do the work for them. By taking Bleak Watcher, the new Hellion aspect, and the Needlestorm super, you'll have a small army at your disposal. The only problem being that, if you do that, you miss out on what I'd argue is the best option here: Feed the Void. With it, ability damage procs Devour, one of the strongest buffs in the game. While Devour is active, any kill – from weapons or abilities – completely restores your health, grants grenade energy and refreshes Devour's timer. And it pairs with every other aspect.

For instance, there's a potentially fun combo to be had taking Strand's Arcane Needle melee and Arc's Lightning Surge aspect, which expends melee charges to slide into a pack of enemies, jolting and damaging the lot. Arcane Needle gives you three melee charges, which means more slides, and with Feed the Void, you'll emerge completely unscathed. The only aspect letting the side down right now is Weaver's Call – three Threadling spawns when casting your rift just isn't very impactful.



SUPER

Song of Flame | Nova Bomb: Cataclysm | Stormtrance | Winter's Wrath | Needlestorm

MELEE

Incinerator Snap | Pocket Singularity | Chain Lightning | Penumbral Blast | Arcane Needle

GRENADE

Healing Grenade | Vortex Grenade | Storm Grenade | Coldsnap Grenade | Threadling Grenade

ASPECTS

Hellion | Feed the Void | Lightning Surge | Bleak Watcher | Weaver's Call

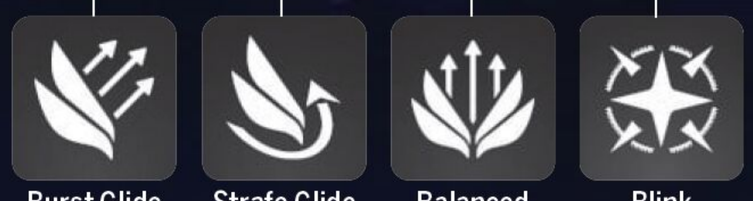
TRANSCENDENT GRENADE

Freezing Singularity
A combination of Void and Stasis that will slow and suppress enemies before dealing heavy damage.

CLASS ABILITY

Healing Rift | Empowering Rift | Phoenix Dive

MOVEMENT



Burst Glide | Strafe Glide | Balanced Glide | Blink

available to us to do this? And I think, in a meta way, this is the way we envisioned. With the exotic class items for each one of the classes – the combination of two exotics, was something we were really excited and also really scared about. But I think we did a really good job and I think players are gonna have a blast trying to find whatever concepts they want."

The cynical read is that Prismatic is a collection of things we already have – existing subclass effects paired with existing exotic armour perks. But what's more important is that it represents a way to master buildcrafting – finding new synergies within the entire catalogue of buffs and debuffs that each existing subclass allows. And it sounds like it will be expandable, too. "We're not launching with everything we might ever launch," says Macedo, although she stops at confirming new aspects being brought over to the subclass. "As developers, it's exciting to have that to play with in the future."

THE FINAL SHAPE'S OTHER BIG RECENT REVEAL WAS THE DREAD, A NEW ENEMY FACTION

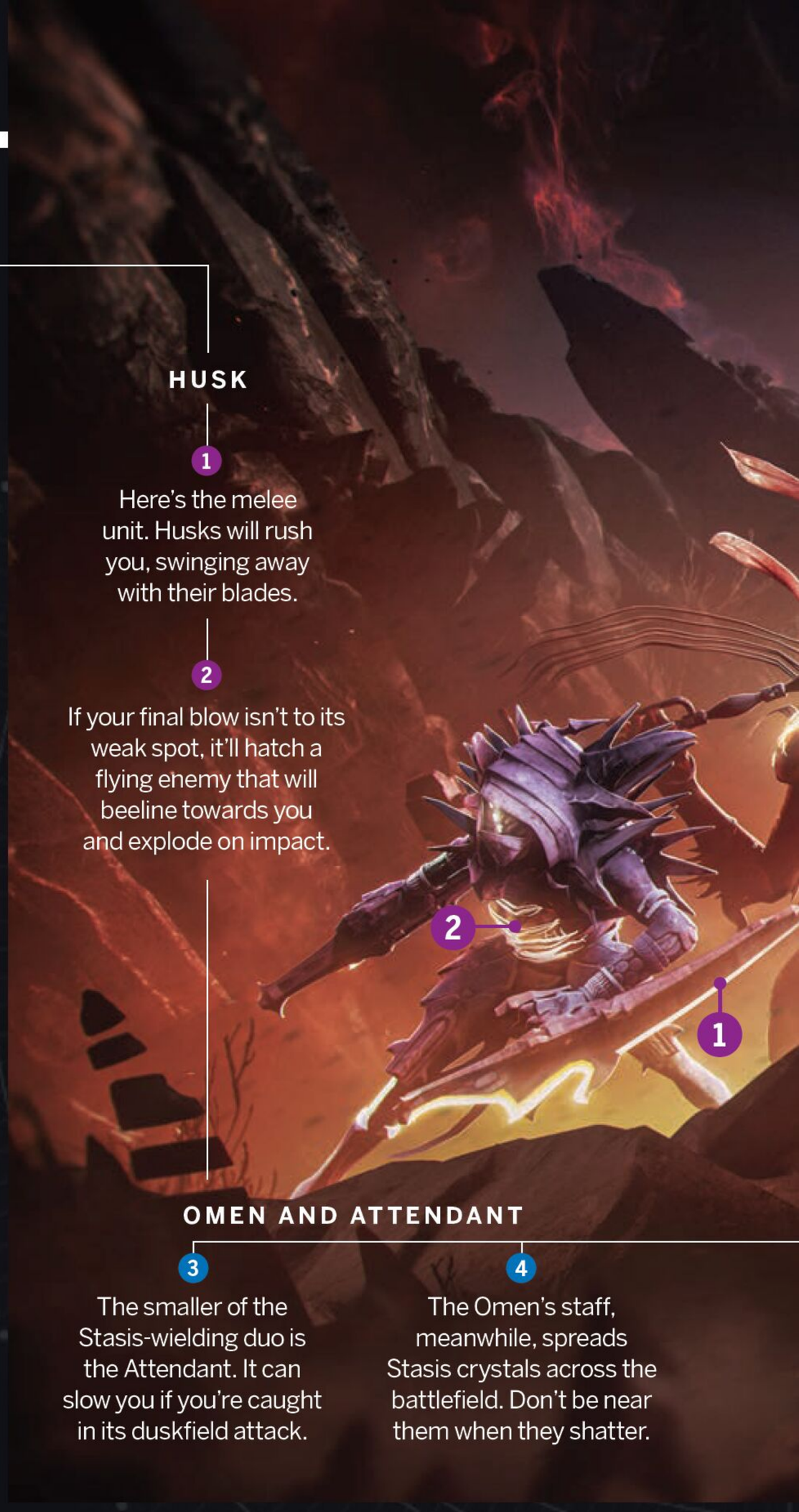
BETTER DREAD THAN DEAD

What's a new subclass without something to use it against? *The Final Shape*'s other big recent reveal was The Dread, a new enemy faction. "It has been a long time since we introduced more fodder units," admits Macedo. The basic enemies of recent expansions *The Witch Queen* and *Lightfall* were variants of existing factions with a new twist. The main new threat instead came from bigger enemies. *The Witch Queen* had the Lightbearers – Hive enemies empowered by Light, who were able to cast supers against us. And *Lightfall* brought the Tormentors – relentless hulks who are immune to damage until the weak spots on their shoulders are destroyed.

The Dread share the same aesthetic as the Tormentors, and act as the primary force of the main antagonist of this expansion, The Witness. As a faction, they seem to focus on crowd control and disruption. "In the two big Subjugators we have that are part of The Dread, one wields Strand and the other wields Stasis," explains Macedo. "Those are the major combatants that we want to make sure are the anchors of encounters."

For the smaller enemies – the red bar grunts that make up the majority of the battlefield – each has a quirk that makes them more interesting to deal with in packs. Take the Grim. They're just little guys, flying around the battlefield firing off small projectiles. If you're caught by their shriek attack, you'll be slowed and suppressed – unable to use your abilities. That's unlikely to be a problem against a small group, but in a full battlefield, when you're dealing with packs of both Grim and other Dread, it will be easy to slip up. And The Dread's ability suite allows for some deadly follow-up attacks.

It should make a big difference during *The Final Shape*'s campaign. Bungie has done a good job of crafting varied challenges out of its existing enemy factions, but at this point players have an innate sense of how to deal with them all. Target priority has become second nature, making it easier to react to any situation. New fodder units can shake that on its head – forcing us to puzzle out how to respond to new compositions. "It was really fun to play *The Final Shape* before the combatants [were added], and doing the playtest once they got in," says Macedo.


HUSK
1
Here's the melee unit. Husks will rush you, swinging away with their blades.
2
If your final blow isn't to its weak spot, it'll hatch a flying enemy that will beeline towards you and explode on impact.
2
1
OMEN AND ATTENDANT
3
The smaller of the Stasis-wielding duo is the Attendant. It can slow you if you're caught in its duskfield attack.
4
The Omen's staff, meanwhile, spreads Stasis crystals across the battlefield. Don't be near them when they shatter.

CAN I GET A WITNESS

According to Macedo, *The Final Shape*'s campaign was designed to honour the time that players have spent in *Destiny* up to this point. "One of the big ideas for the Pale Heart is that, because you're going inside of a god, and no one has ever gone inside this particular god, how are we going to represent that? And so there's going to be moments where we're going to see the pure Traveler and what that looks like. But this is a place where it is shaped by the players and the Guardians' memories, and the Vanguard as well."

The environments of the Pale

LEFT: *The Final Shape*: pyramid or orb? You decide.

RISING DREAD

Meet The Final Shape's new enemy faction

GRIM

8

They gave the bat a gun. It fires slow dart projectiles that gently track towards you.

7

If you're caught by its scream attack, you'll be slowed for a time, and your abilities will be suppressed.

HARBINGER AND WEAVER

5

On the Strand side of things, the Weaver will throw out an energy wave. Get caught in it and you'll be pulled towards your foe.

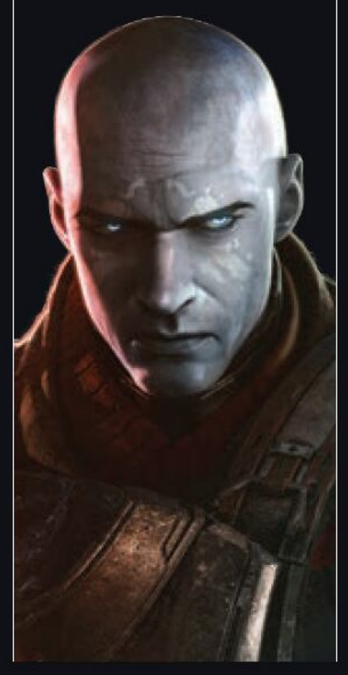
6

The Harbinger, meanwhile, wants to hold you in place – firing out projectiles that will suspend you in the air if they hit.

Heart – a new setting for *Final Shape* – are representations of the things you've done before. Its opening section, for instance, is a version of the Tower social hub from the first game – but overgrown with plants and life. "We're really excited for players to both feel the familiarity of these places and these characters, and feel that The Witness is present and twisting things in a way that's really interesting." The linearity of the destination – in contrast to *Destiny 2*'s other, more hub-based maps – reinforces the journey into Darkness. Of heading towards The Witness and seeing the world become darker and more corrupted. "As you get closer to the big spire of The Witness, then you see more of its influence," says Macedo. "Honestly, our environment artists are some of the best in the world."

It's true that Bungie's art team excels at abstraction and symbolism – as seen previously in spaces like the Prophecy dungeon – and the brief here is particularly compelling. It's playing off nostalgia, yes, but using it as a shorthand for the threat of the saga's big bad. "'Oh, someone is corrupting this thing we hold dear.' From an environment and a storytelling perspective, we wanted to reinforce that you're not supposed to like what The Witness is doing here. This is the very visual, visceral way of displaying that."

If I have a worry about *The Final Shape* as the finale of *Destiny 2*'s current saga, it's that *Lightfall* exposed some limitations in the way Bungie delivered a narrative. It tried to pull on too many plot threads, unable to coherently weave them together within the storytelling mechanisms that exist within the game. With *The Final Shape*, Bungie is tackling a bunch of dense concepts – namely The Traveler, a mysterious god-like being that created the Ghosts powering our Guardians, and The Witness, the entity that opposes the Light, created from the twisted collective consciousness of an ancient alien species. Even the Witness's plan, the titular Final Shape, is currently unclear. It's end-of-the-universe bad, but in what way exactly?



It feels like there's a lot of ground to cover, but, according to Macedo, Bungie is keeping things focused. "In some ways we have one mission this time: get to The Witness. It's really about that. Another big anchor of the story was for it to be about you and your fireteam. It's a tight-knit story of, 'Hey, we're going on this story together into oblivion to potentially defeat the biggest bad we've ever seen in *Destiny*.'"

If Bungie can pull it off, it has the potential to be the biggest moment in *Destiny 2*'s history. A fitting end to the Light and Darkness saga would do a lot to bring the community back on board, ready for what happens next. After the year it's had – after the reception to *Lightfall*, and after the controversies it has faced – Bungie understands the stakes of this assignment. If the studio delivers an expansion that can live up to the best moments of its past, it'll be proof that there's life left for whatever the *next* saga might bring. We're so back. ■

Asseto Corsa Competizione

HELL GOES GREEN

How The Nordschleife in **ASSETO CORSA COMPETIZIONE** was built.

By Mike Stubbs

With over 20 kilometres of winding tarmac in the German mountains, the Nürburgring is the most loved, and feared, track in all of motorsport. However, digitally recreating this unique track has proven difficult for countless developers. Now, KUNOS Simulazioni thinks it has nailed it with the launch of the Nordschleife in *Assetto Corsa Competizione*.

Since launching in 2018, the most requested addition to *Assetto Corsa Competizione* has been the iconic Nordschleife track. With the Nürburgring GP circuit, a shorter more traditional racetrack at the same location, already being in the game, many assumed that adding in the Nordschleife ('north loop') would be a natural next step. However, there was one sticking point; SRO, the real-life racing championship that *ACC* is a simulation of, didn't race on the Nordschleife.

"That was the only reason," says Marco Massurutto, co-founder of *ACC* developer KUNOS Simulazioni. "SRO included the Nordschleife in their calendar [this year] and before then, it was not included in the calendar. So actually, we weren't allowed to include a track that is not in the championship. Of course, people asked the most for the Nordschleife from the very first day and our reply was, 'The day when SRO will include it in the calendar, you will get it.' Eventually, we did it."

But the process of getting to this point wasn't quite as smooth as you might have imagined. Despite being a partner of the SRO championship and mirroring the competition as closely as possible for years, KUNOS wasn't given a heads up about the announcement of the Nordschleife being added, meaning the studio found out at the same time as everyone else in early July 2023. At this point the team was working on another DLC pack, adding GT2 cars and the Red Bull Ring circuit to *ACC* and what we now know as *Asseto Corsa Evo*, a new game in the series that is due to arrive later this year.

"As you can imagine, when we have more than one project in progress, you have a timescale that you define far in advance the tasks you are going to do," says Massurutto. "This news about the Nordschleife surprised us at KUNOS as much as any other person, because SRO, didn't tell us in advance. So we had a meeting, a ten-minute meeting, to decide what to do. [It was a] ten-minute meeting because in the end, we can't ignore the Nordschleife. Certainly, it is changing our working schedule, but we can't complain because the experience of driving in *Competizione* on the Nürburgring, it's quite amazing."

BUILDING AN ICON

With the decision made that it would bring the Nordschleife to *ACC*, the team got to work straight away on building what has to be the most iconic track in motorsport. With over 170 corners, massive elevation changes and countless details around the track this was a mammoth task, but one it had done before. *Asseto Corsa*, the first game in the series that launched in 2014, also has a version of the Nordschleife, but with almost ten years of technical advancement, experience in producing racing simulations and many changes to the track, the team was essentially starting from scratch.

With the *AC1* version of the Nordschleife being of little use, the team was back to the beginning of the process and that meant it needed to find the most accurate way of transporting the current version of the track to the digital world. This is where a company known as 3D Mapping Solutions came in, supplying an accurate and up-to-date scan that not only includes the track surface and its layout but also the area around the track and its limits.

TOP: It's not just the cars at the track, stewards are positioned all around to wave their flags.

ABOVE: A close battle on the track is exhilarating.

This technology means that the track can be as close to real life as possible, and it also paves the way to make sure that the recreated track remains that way. If there are any future changes to the track, the updated 3D scan can be compared to what is being used in *ACC* and the areas that need to be updated can be easily identified and changed.

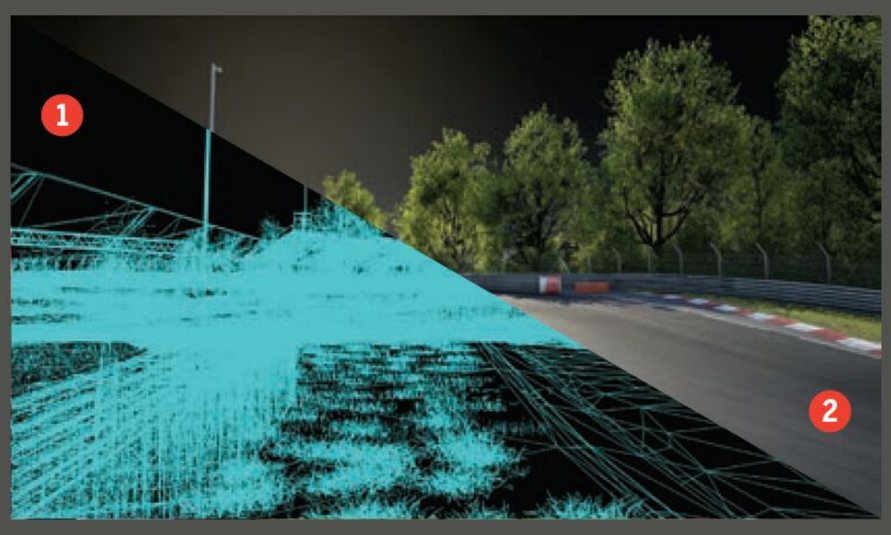
"We use the laser scan technology but we don't scan the track by ourselves," says Massurutto. "There is a firm that works with Nürburgring that every year, every time they resurface the track or make some changes, they rescan the track and they share the data with us. So the only way that we can guarantee that we are copying the real counterpart the best is by using the latest laser scan so that we can compare the 3D point cloud with the 3D assets, and we can change those things."

TECHNICAL LIMITS

While the 3D scans made it reasonably easy to make sure that the track itself was as close to real life as possible, there were a lot of other technical issues the team had to overcome when building the track. As one of the longest tracks in the

BEHIND THE TRACK

The underlying tech of the Nordschleife



1 WIRE
The 3D scan KUNOS gets is almost unrecognisable as the final track, but this is the vital part of making sure the track is as realistic as possible.

2 PAINT
Once the art layer is added to the frame it looks recognisable, but it's only with the final art assets and cars on track that you really appreciate its beauty.

THE TEAM GOT TO WORK STRAIGHT AWAY ON BUILDING WHAT IS THE MOST ICONIC TRACK IN MOTORSPORT

ABOVE: The Nordschleife is known as the green hell for a reason.

LEFT: The only thing more difficult than driving the Nordschleife is driving it at night in the wet.

world, and significantly longer than anything in *ACC*, the sheer scale of what the game needed to load presented a challenge.

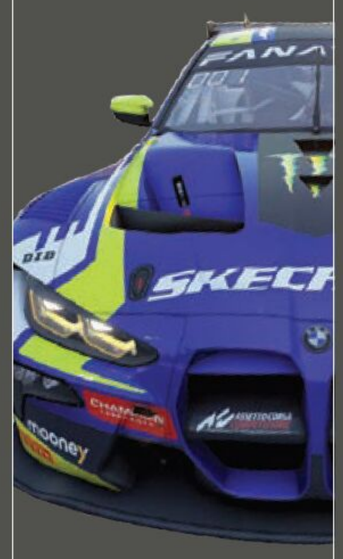
"The difference we saw at the beginning, that now has been totally fixed, was the loading times, which actually were terrible," says Massurutto. "We put our heads into it to understand what was happening, because the loading times in *ACC* usually are quite fast, and at the end, we found the reason and we saw the data. So now you are not going to wait a lot so long to load the asset."

The issue seems to have been fixed so well that in the final release, you wouldn't even notice an extended loading time if you are playing on a decent-level PC.

Part of the reason for the large CPU load that both *ACC* and the Nordschleife require is the level of physics that is being simulated around the track. The variation in the track, both in speed and verticality, means there is a lot more that needs to be handled by the physics engine compared to other tracks.

"There has been a different kind of technical challenge, not just the bigger size of the track itself in terms of 3D modelling, but also for the physics, because you need to calculate the physics, the way how tyres touch the ground, in every single moment," says Massurutto. "In *Asseto Corsa 1* when we made it, we struggled a lot to make it right because the cars were starting to shake and do some weird things. We needed to make sure that we fixed that in *AC1*, but we knew that possibly we were going to face the same challenge in *ACC*."

While a lot of the issues were filtered out reasonably early on in the development process, mainly thanks to the work the team has done over the years to perfect the physics system in *ACC*, it was a task that needed to be perfected before release.



This is especially true with the incredible downforce that the GT3 and GT2 cars have in real life that makes them stick to the track in a very different way to the road cars you would see in *AC1*.

UNMATCHED REALISM

Then there was the task of making sure that the final version matched up with the real-life version as closely as possible. While the 3D scan included things a good distance on either side of the track, there were lots of small things that needed to be added to make this as close to real life as possible. To make sure they got it exactly right, drivers such as Misha Charoudin, a YouTuber who is well known for his Nürburgring content, were brought into the studio to point out all the important reference points that were wrong or missing.

The result is one of, if not the, most realistic representations of the Nordschleife in the virtual world. For any motorsport fan, or even just people who love driving, if you can't experience the Nordschleife in real life, this is the next best thing.

"The level of detail in the track, the graphics and the day/night cycle is unreal," says George 'UKOG' Boothby, a pro-*ACC* driver for Veloce Esports who won the GT4 class in the first 24-hour race on the track.

It is an impressive feat, not only to have produced an incredibly detailed and realistic digital representation of one of the most iconic and unique racetracks in the world but also to have made something that is great fun to drive, and is something that every fan should experience. ■

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT
DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS
Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK
Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.
Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.
Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.
Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.
Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.
Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.
Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.
Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.
Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.
Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.
Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.
Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.

PC PowerPlay EDITOR'S CHOICE

The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews

Broken dreams

We've got to say that we were markedly disappointed when this month's review of *Broken Roads* came in. This is a game that we know many PC gamers have been looking forward to for a long time, with its unique Australian take on a *Fallout*-style post-apocalypse RPG really capturing the attention. So when we read the review to discover that it had serious shortcomings, our hearts sank. As our review shows, it's not awful, and it does offer strong writing along with a unique morality system that feels fresh, but these are not enough to make it an easy recomendation. Maybe with a few patches that can change.

It's a reminder to try not to get too invested in games before they launch, no matter how much personal affection you have for a particular genre.

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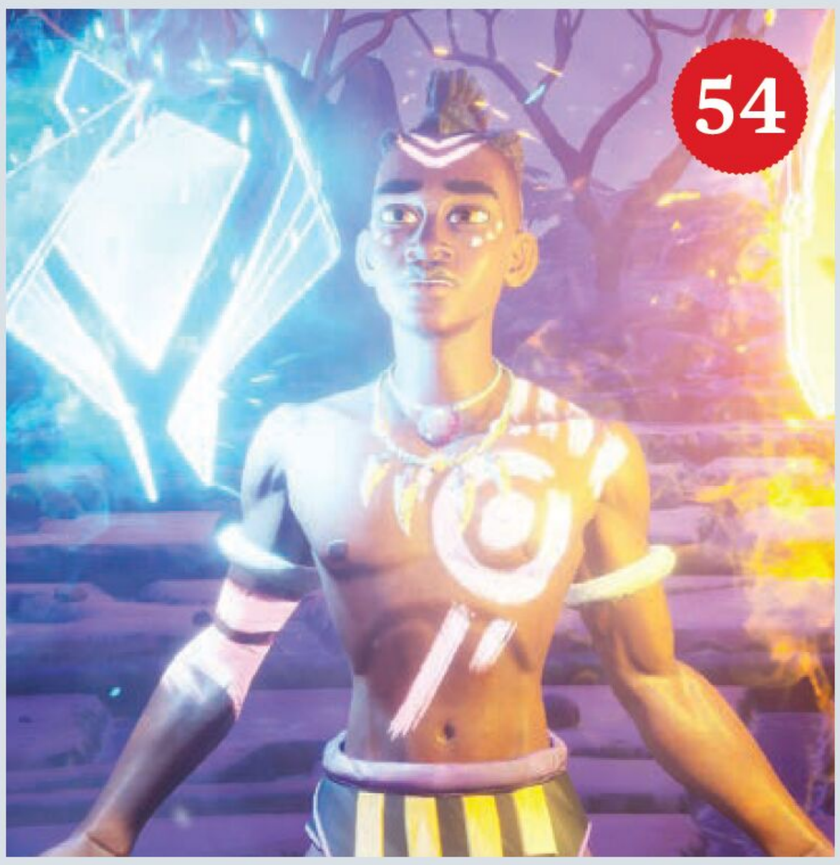
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This month's bonzer reviewers...

RICK LANE
Specialist in
Being limey
Currently playing
Broken Roads
This month
Threw a shrimp on the barbie and knocked back a few tinnies with a couple of Sheilas.

PHIL IWANIUK
Specialist in
Tactical disasters
Currently playing
Millennia
This month
Broke down his neighbour's garden into hexes and then slowly invaded them.

KERRY BRUNSKILL
Specialist in
Anime nonsense
Currently playing
Sand Land
This month
Guided a rag-tag bunch of stereotypes to save the Earth from clichéd bad guys.

JOSH WOLENS
Specialist in
Many herrings
Currently playing
Harold Halibut
This month
Insulted us with fish puns. What a total and utter bass-tard. See, squid-pro-quo, Josh.

ABBIE STONE
Specialist in
Drilling furiously
Currently playing
Pepper Grinder
This month
Drilled through the floor of PCPP Towers. Found five vortigaunts playing Texas hold 'em.

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LOOSE MORALS

BROKEN ROADS: a cerebral narrative adventure

By Rick Lane

The Kalgoorlie Silvers have received a tip. Some rabble-rousers are plotting unrest in a nearby apartment, and the authorities have ordered a raid. The plan is to bust down the door and secure the suspects by force, and while they don't want to kill everyone, they expect two or three bodies at the least. Having been temporarily assigned to the squad, I propose a radical alternative. How about – and just hear me out on this – we try talking to them first?

Squad leader Irma Wakefield arches an eyebrow, "Convince me," she says. I start off by appealing to her humanity. As officers of the law, we have a duty to protect people if possible, and surely that includes the people on the other side of the door. This is dismissed as bleeding-heart liberal nonsense, so I try a more utilitarian approach. How reliable is the information we've received? Do we know exactly what these supposed rebels are planning, or if they're even planning anything at all? Does this raid ultimately serve the greater good?

Wakefield says the orders came from the top, and she isn't predisposed to questioning them. I respond to this with a sprinkling of Machiavellianism. Surely, by investigating the situation thoroughly, you demonstrate your aptitude for the job, and you cannot possibly be blamed for doing your job properly. You might even be rewarded for it. That gets through, and Wakefield lets me speak to the suspects through the door. But I've only got three questions before the door gets busted down, so I'm going to have to come up with a pretty convincing argument quickly.

Ekes an impressive amount of variety out of its setting

This is what *Broken Roads* is like at its best, a sharply written, intellectual adventure where your approach to dialogue and problem solving is drawn from philosophical concepts. But I must confess to a spot of Machiavellianism myself. I chose the path of dialogue not out of a fundamental respect for humanity, or to serve the greater good. I chose it to avoid *Broken Roads* at its worst – a barebones post-apocalyptic RPG with limited character progression, buggy quests, and tedious combat. Drop Bear Bytes' road trip through a shattered Australia might have a knack for pondering the big questions, but when it comes to doing the basics it can be pretty bloody hopeless.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Bite-sized post-apocalyptic CRPG with big ideas and bigger problems

EXPECT TO PAY
$50.95

DEVELOPER
Drop Bear Bytes

PUBLISHER
Versus Evil

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 3600, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce 2080 Super

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
brokenroadsgame.com

BACKGROUND

Where you start in *Broken Roads* depends on what background you pick for your character. I selected the trading background Barter Crew, escorting a merchant convoy out of a little village called Kokeby. But Hired Guns and Surveyors enter the game at a fortified enclosure called Bally Bally Hall. Whichever origin you choose, all roads eventually lead to a small town called Bookton, which is sprung upon by raiders from the aforementioned Kalgoorlie. As you flee from the flames and the gunfire, you and the remaining survivors are left with two questions. Why did Kalgoorlie attack, and how can we get into the city to find out?

You spend much of the game trying to answer these two questions as you explore what remains of civilisation in the Australian outback. And exploring is one of the two things that I enjoy most about *Broken Roads*. Although it's by no means a huge game (a point we'll return to later), Drop Bear Bytes ekes an impressive amount of variety out of its setting, and every place you visit is rich in visual detail and character. These include a subterranean cave network from which an aboriginal family of traders conduct their business, an ecological commune who debate the questions of life, the universe and everything from their lofty perch in a converted grain silo, and a walled community of scientists who keep unwanted visitors out with a device that melts brains.

It's a colourful world filled with colourful people, which leads us to *Broken Roads*' other strength, dialogue. The game is primarily narrative driven, and at a line-to-line level, the writing lives up to the task. Through naturalistic dialogue laced with Australian slang, Drop Bear Byte conjures sharply observed characters out of just a few lines. Whether you're shooting the breeze with the landlady of the Flaming Galah pub, or discussing

THE MORAL COMPASS

Here's how Broken Roads' approach to morality works

1 Each quadrant of the wheel represents a different perspective.

2 Your 'moral history' chronicles your dialogue choices through the game.

3 Your leaning unlocks various moral traits, essentially combat bonuses.

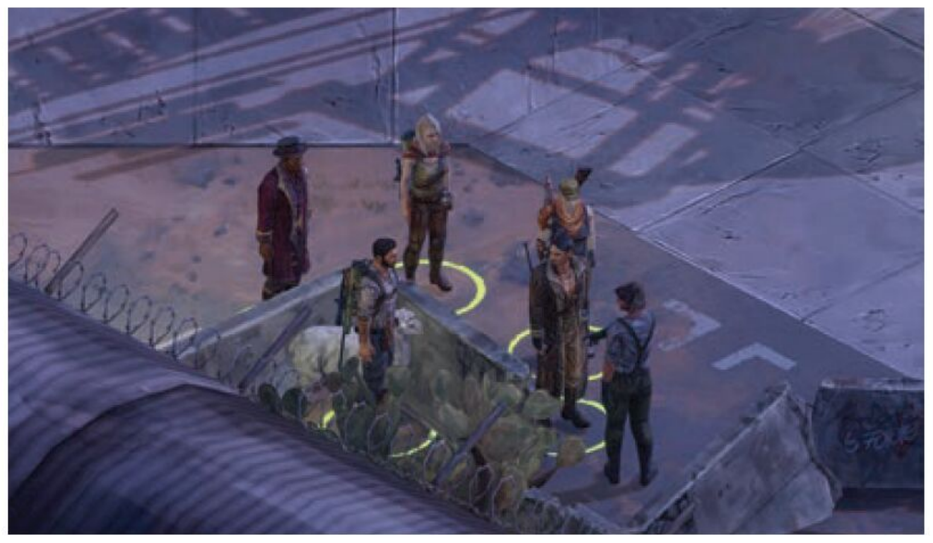
4 You aren't locked into a philosophy, and will likely go between ethical values.

You can influence a lot of the game's story, though not everything can be changed.
Connor McCabe
His laughter hurts your ears. "So we're stuck between idealists who think death is freedom from tyranny, and money-grubbing assholes who want to profit off our misery. A hundred years of mutual assistance, pissed away in ten seconds." He clenches his fists. "Your city's going to burn, and you'll have no one but yourselves to blame."
Lowry
1: Continue

ABOVE: The game generally looks very nice, although this screenshot is a bit plane.

BELOW: *Broken Roads* ain't all orange desert.

Active Quest
Of a Future State
Disable 'The Device' in Southern Cross
Depose Brennan in Lake Deborah
Convince Djet in Koorda to share her knowledge with Kalgoorlie
Enter Kalgoorlie as a Mercenary
Enter Kalgoorlie as a Trader
Enter Kalgoorlie as a Scientist
Enter Kalgoorlie as a Philosopher
Denny Irving
"Yeeeup, closest thing to a living miracle *I've* ever seen. Look around you, mate. This is paradise."
Lowry
1: "What've you got for trade?"
2: "So you believe in miracles?"
3: "This place is incredible."
4: "You in charge of the grounds here?"
5: "I've never seen so much water."



ABOVE: Nothing convinces me more than a shop with the word 'Honest' on the sign.

Sally Eades
"What can I get ya?" Her calloused hand is knotted around an old rag as she wipes the shining bartop free of spills. She flashes you a quick smile. "First drink's free, if you promise to buy three more."
Lowry
1: Continue

One of the first things you do in the game is go to the pub, natch.

Active Quest
Of a Future State
Disable 'The Device' in Southern Cross
Depose Brennan in Lake Deborah
Convince Djet in Koorda to share her kno
with Kalgoorlie
Enter Kalgoorlie as a Mercenary
Enter Kalgoorlie as a Trader
Enter Kalgoorlie as a Scientist
Enter Kalgoorlie as a Philosopher
Some smart Alec has scrawled "This way to enlightenment!" with an arrow pointing up.
Experience
Party Gained 25 exp

Descartes with Mira Calder, librarian of the Lake Deborah commune, simply wandering around the game exhausting the dialogue trees is often its own reward. Even the characters who don't want to talk to you, like the thoroughly unpleasant leader of the scientist community, communicate their disdain for you in amusingly nasty ways.

But there's more to dialogue than just telling the story. It's also where *Broken Roads*' most novel feature lies – the moral compass. *Broken Roads* doesn't frame narrative choices in terms of save the baby/eat the baby, and neither does it shoot for Geralt of Rivia grey. Instead, choices are framed around different schools of ethical thought, namely humanism, utilitarianism, Machiavellianism, and nihilism. I can't explain what each of these are in detail as it would take up the rest of the review, but very roughly, their respective outlooks on morality are 'save the baby', 'save the baby if it provides maximum happiness for all babies', 'save the baby if doing so consolidates your power over babykind' and 'save a baby? Fuck that'.

Making a choice according to one of these viewpoints will push the point of the compass deeper into that perspective, offering more dialogue options from that school of thought. If you make a choice that contravenes your current philosophy, it will result in a more dramatic swing away from it. You're never completely funnelled down one path, but your choices will influence the array of future options available to you.

Now, this idea has the potential to be astoundingly pretentious. And between the quotes from philosophers on the loading screens, and the quests named after different philosophical texts and concepts, *Broken Roads* can have the vibe of a first-year ethics student who has just discovered Kant. Its biggest indulgence is a quest that revolves specifically about scavenging the wasteland for philosophy texts for Mira's library. Some of these are found with booksellers and memorabilia collectors, which is plausible enough. Others are just scattered around the wasteland. After a bloody gunfight with a bunch of Mad Max-style raiders, I discovered a copy of Machiavelli's Discourses on Livy in a dented footlocker next to a wheelie bin. It's preposterous, not least because Mad Max raiders are obviously Nietzsche fans.

Ultimately though, I ended up wishing that the game focussed purely on its morality system and philosophical dialogue. Experimenting with these different perspectives, seeing how characters and situations respond to them, is by far when *Broken Roads* is most fun. It's an idea you could go full *Disco Elysium* with, wandering around the wasteland having philosophical debates with every character you come across. Instead, the system gets somewhat lost amid *Broken Roads*' broader attempt to replicate a traditional CRPG, at which it is less successful.

Basically, *Broken Roads* tries to deliver a fully fledged CRPG experience in about 20 hours, and trying to pack that kind of experience into this timeframe causes numerous problems. Firstly, the story feels like it's an act short, wrapping up almost as soon as you uncover what's really going on in Kalgoorlie, and what exactly is at stake for your community and Australia at large. But it also means a lot of the game's more familiar CRPG systems are undercooked. The combat system is an incredibly basic turn-based affair, lacking the weapon, enemy or ability variety to produce interesting tactical scenarios. There's a magic system, but again, it's limited to a handful of abilities that frankly feel like an afterthought. Choosing stats and abilities is restricted only to your avatar, while your party levels up automatically. There just isn't enough space for the game to give you the sense of progression an RPG needs.

NUMEROUS ISSUES

On top of this, there are frequent intervals at which *Broken Roads* is, well, broken. The combat, for example, doesn't factor in that characters and objects might overlap, making it difficult and sometimes impossible to select targets. I also encountered numerous issues with quests not resolving properly, failing to mark off objectives, or not providing the dialogue options needed to progress. One quest included the option to pay a prisoner's bail to spring them from jail. But when I went to the Governor's office to pay said ransom, the only thing I could say to her was "bye".

Another time, I was warned that I shouldn't ask about a particularly nasty character in Kalgoorlie as they might come looking for me. The second I did ask, said character appeared as if in a puff of smoke, and the game teleported me to a different part of the map for a combat encounter with them.

I like a lot about *Broken Roads*. I like its style. I like its tone. I like its attempt to do something different with morality in RPGs. It's clearly a game made with vision and affection, and aspires to be more than a *Fallout* knockoff. Unfortunately, that doesn't change the fact that it often feels half-finished. Mechanically, it fails to give many systems the room they need to breathe, its questing is beset by bugs, and the story rushes to a climax that doesn't really satisfy. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

There's half of an amazing game in *Broken Roads*. Trouble is you have to play the other half too.

64

MEIER'S BASTARDISATION

MILLENNIA attempts a spirited but messy coup to Civ's throne

By Phil Iwaniuk

The thing about plagues is that they tend to catch everyone off guard. That was certainly the case when I triggered a plague age in Rome in the early common era. But since these undesirable ages are triggered by the accumulation of chaos and unrest in the first place, it wasn't as though my Roman empire was in great shape before the coughing started.

I'd been fighting off barbarians for so long, I inadvertently triggered a chaos event: a rebellion, spawning pikemen and cavalry beside every regional capital. Thus I had to commit even further to channelling all my resources into a military offensive on several fronts, which raised unrest even more, until the plague doctors arrived and my population dropped by a third. Brutal? Yes. Admirable? That too.

Millennia's a lot like *Civilization*. Like Amplitude's recent remix of the classic Sid Meier experience *Humankind*, it promises an enticing shakeup of the decades-old formula and offers a fresh spin on things.

Fresh blood in this sub-genre can only be a good thing. I must admit that sentiment wasn't always foremost in my mind during several unilaterally savage campaigns in *Millennia*, however. It has a way of burying salient menus and mechanics within its UI, and of teaching you new systems by simply springing events on you.

Whereas *Civ* generally rewards a really concentrated effort towards one of its victory conditions from the outset, *Millennia* wants you to be a generalist. There are juicy unlocks waiting in its labyrinthine menus, tied to several different currencies – government, exploration, warfare, engineering, diplomacy and arts. Separate to those, you're amassing research and culture, and founding and spreading a religion. And it really doesn't pay to neglect any of them.

To its credit, that makes for a refreshingly different approach to amassing hex tiles and conquering foreign lands, one that occasionally feels logical and true to the 'define your people by your actions' promise. Do loads of battles and you build up plenty of warfare points that make you even more potent in conflict.

Promises an enticing shakeup of the decades-old formula

JOY OF HEX

That's when it's working as intended. However, it's not always that sensible. Government points are very hard to come by until the age of Discovery, when setting Explorers off on expeditions has a chance to net me a massive +30 government points. Which is welcome, don't get me wrong. But what does sending someone up a mountain have to do with governmental efficacy?

Another faintly fumbled chance for *Millennia* to assert a deviation from *Civ* comes with the chance to adopt a National Spirit for each age which gives you unique perks and units. It sounds like a way to tailor your nation according to the victory you're going after, but it plays out feeling more like a concession to the fact that nations are interchangeable.

National Spirits have to work this way, because nations really are interchangeable. Their only unique traits are the city names that appear when you found them. There are perks for each nation, but they're simply assigned from a list, as you learn when like me, you delve into the custom nation creator then realise how the system works.

Some of *Millennia*'s ideas do lead you to feel like you've built something unique. City production is all about the goods you can produce, rather than the resources that lie within your territory, and this leads to a complex but gratifying sub-game of building supply chains using improvement tiles.

The late game falls victim to exactly the same scourges as *Civilization*, unfortunately – the boring enemy turns, the slow processing times. But I'm not ready to uninstall it yet. I've developed a respect for *Millennia*'s brutal approach and I remain fascinated by the supply chains within its city improvement tile system. Firaxis can sleep quite comfortably at night knowing its dominion remains absolute, but *Millennia*'s dissenting voice is worth listening to for at least a few campaigns. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A *Civ*-like with a new spin on nations victory conditions

EXPECT TO PAY
$56.95

DEVELOPER
C Prompt Games

PUBLISHER
Paradox Interactive

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7 9700K, 16GB RAM,Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080 Ti

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
paradoxinteractive.com/games/millennia

THE WORST OF TIMES

Four crisis ages that'll spice up your game

BLOOD
Plunges all nations into war. On the plus side, military unit upkeep is reduced. Swings and roundabouts.

PLAGUE
Decimates your population as outbreaks pop up in all your territories. Spawns plague doctors to help.

HERESY
Cultists and unrest everywhere. Stamp out their wrong-headed thinking with... museums, oddly.

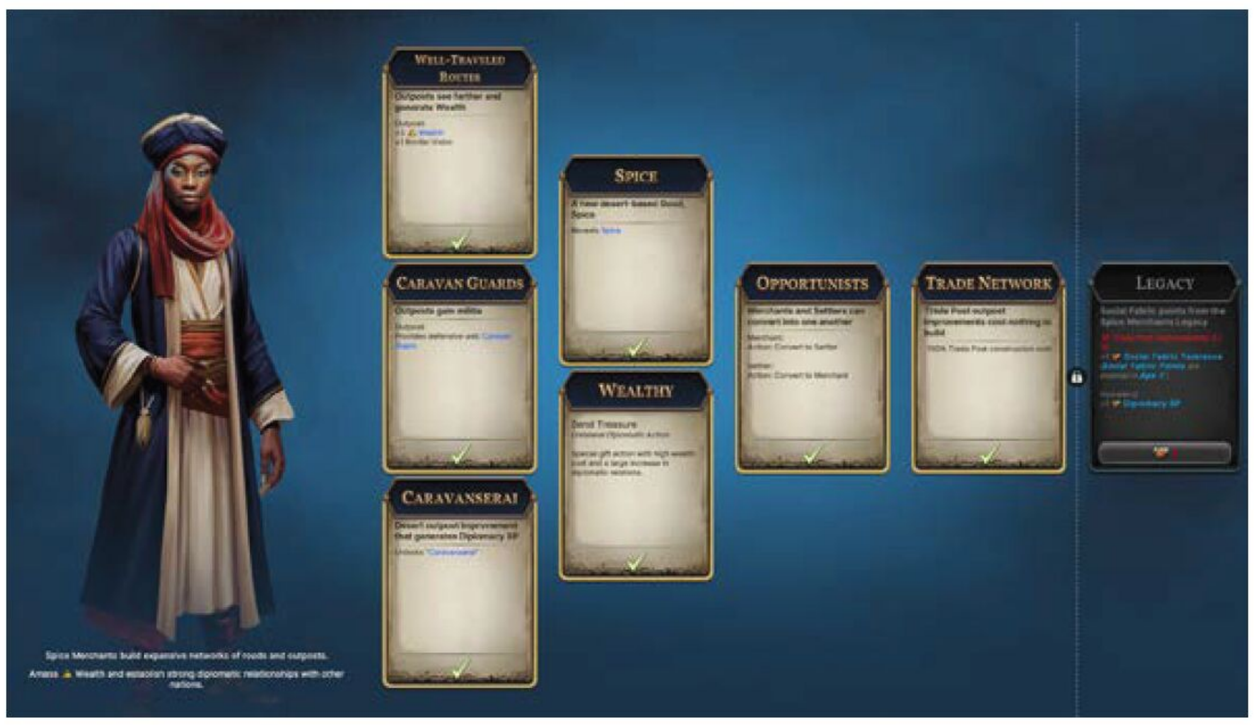
DYSTOPIA
Riots, economic crashes, and the chance to make it all right by winning the space race.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

A rough-edged but worthwhile spin on historical 4X that oddly leaves *Civ*'s greatest flaws untouched.

64

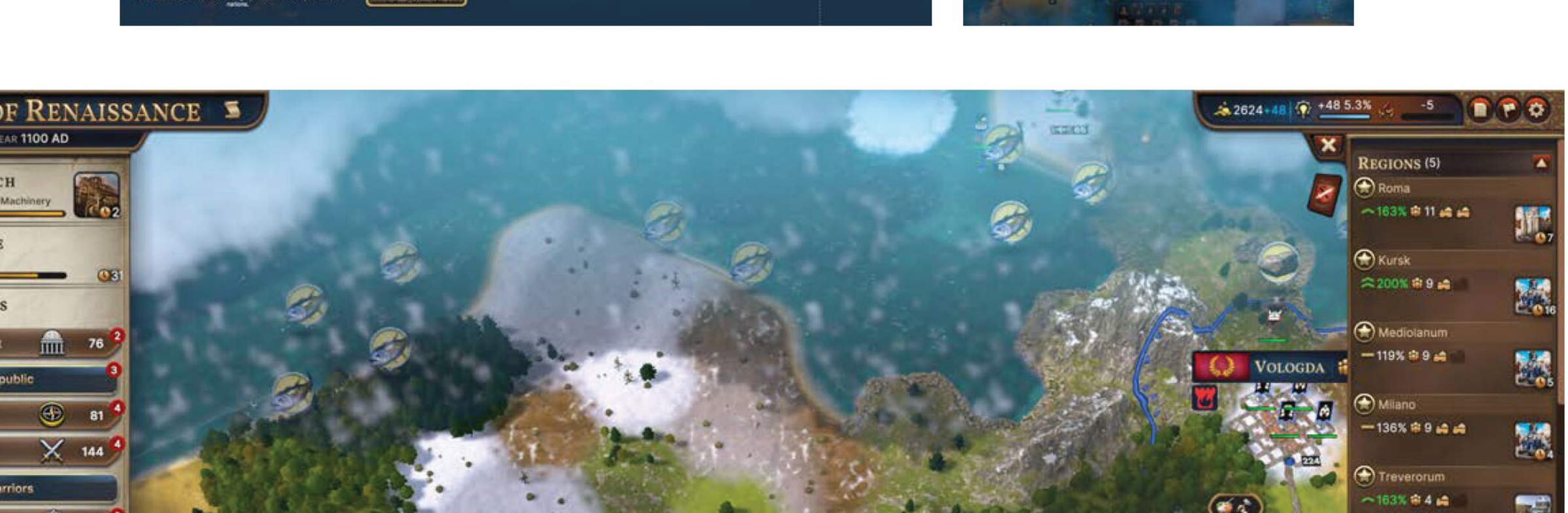
These Barbarians have been nipping my ankles for centuries. Revenge time.



FAR LEFT: National Spirits can be useful, but they feel interchangeable.

LEFT: It takes a few campaigns to figure out what's worth building in your cities.

BELOW: Instead of expanding your empire with new cities, Settlers can establish vassal states.



SHAMAN YOU

TALES OF KENZERA: ZAU is a solid Metroidvania with a timeless story to tell

By Jon Bailes

Mythologies often paint the sun and the moon as complementary opposites, two sides of an enormous shiny coin, as it were. And rarely has this relationship been clearer than in *Tales of Kenzera: Zau*, inspired by the Bantu folklores of southern and central Africa, where solar heat and lunar cool together help you survive its Metroidvania challenges. In short, it's the stuff legends are made of.

Indeed, most of the freshness in *Tales of Kenzera* stems from its setting, given that African mythologies (ancient Egypt excepted) remain a largely untapped resource in games. Playing as young shaman Zau, there's a real sense here that you've been dropped into a legend passed between distant ancestors, drawing on regional lore of magical artefacts, spirits and gods. And Zau's mission is as much about his personal growth as his quest to reclaim his deceased father from the land of the dead.

As for the sun and the moon, their power is infused into a pair of masks, and our hero can quick-change between them to banish the hostile spirits loitering around the otherwise deserted lands. Don the moon mask and you can sling magic bullets as if wielding an automatic pistol, while the sun mask is suited to closer encounters, letting out flurries of melee blows or a launching strike. In later levels especially, you need to juggle attack styles, as combat becomes a kind of frantic puzzle where you try to stay mobile, make use of harmful scenery for quick kills and select the right rock to blunt your opponents' scissors.

There's a real sense here that you've been dropped into a legend

It can get untidy at times, to the point you might lose track of Zau's position amongst a mob, or find yourself sucker punched by a projectile homing in from offscreen. But you always feel there's a way to avoid such mishaps – getting rid of the missile lobber first, for example. A bigger disappointment in fact is that the game's three major regions don't have their own bespoke cast of enemies, with only around eight kinds in all, barring bosses, so a sense of repetition slowly creeps in.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A Metroidvania based on African folklore, and the debut title from Surgent Studios, founded by actor Abubakar Salim

EXPECT TO PAY
$29.95

DEVELOPER
Surgent Studios

PUBLISHER
EA

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2070

MULTIPLAYER
No

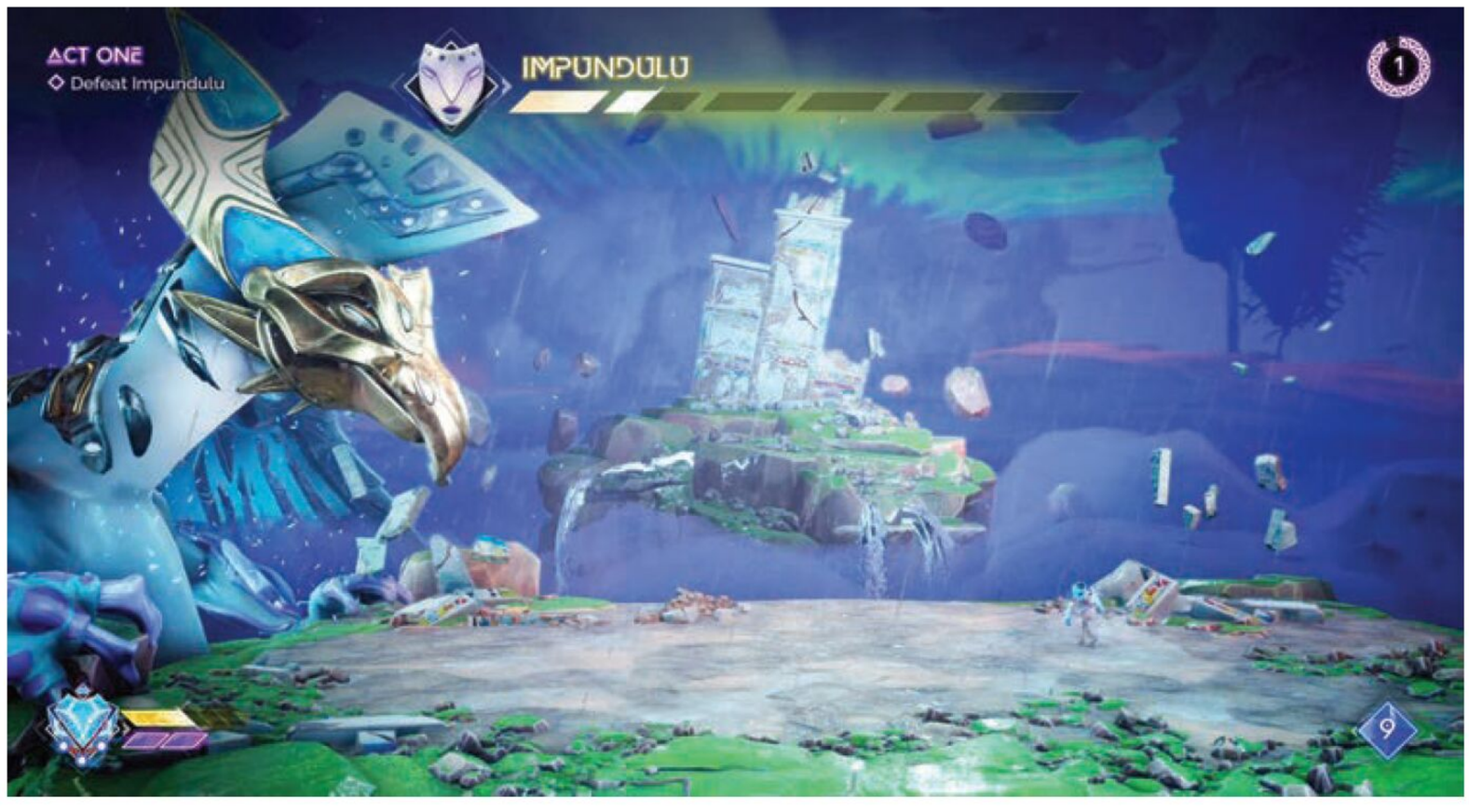
LINK
ea.com/en-au/games/tales-of-kenzera/zau

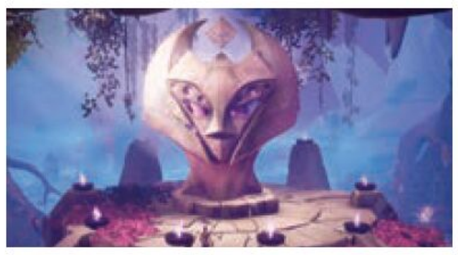
SWITCH HITTER

Outside of combat, Zau's pretty well-stocked with moves from the start, with a double jump and a wall jump among his default skillset. But he soon adds extra combat skills and a series of more momentous abilities bestowed by ancient relics. Each such mythical item provides a new means of navigating the environment, although some are handy in a fight too. The first allows you to freeze waterfalls and enemies temporarily, while the next is essential for striking distant switches and doubles a sun-infused range attack. Once you get a few of these techniques under your belt, *Tales of Kenzera* gets busy with some intricate platforming sequences, asking you to flick through your repertoire with speed.

What these new powers don't do much, however, is open up fresh paths on roads already travelled for further exploration. Many of the

ABOVE: This pink triangle marks the start of a tricky platforming challenge.





ABOVE: These shrines are where you'll find new powers and techniques.

FAR RIGHT: Studio founder Abubakar Salim also provides the voice for Zau.

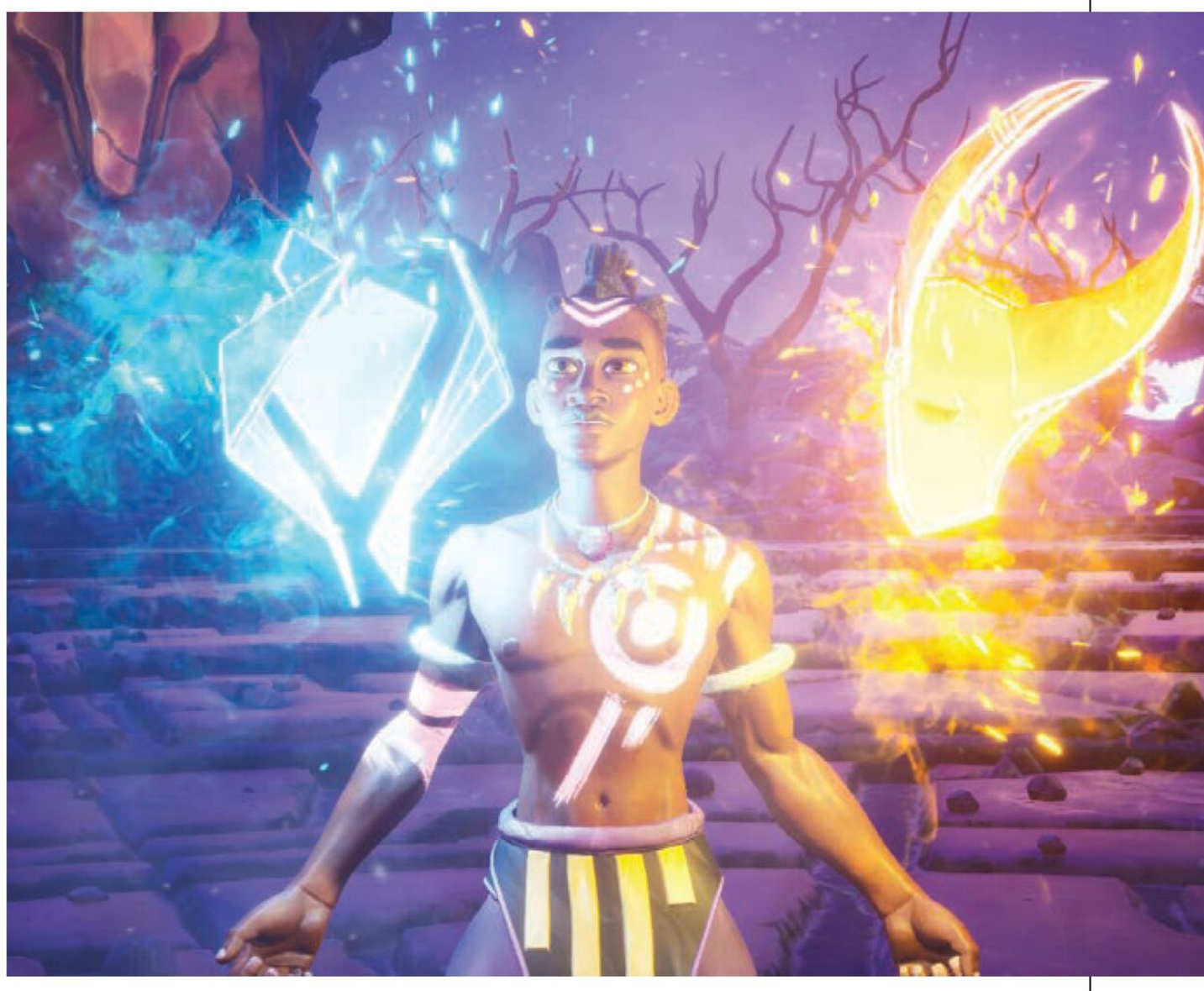
game's non-critical temptations, from max health boosts to challenge rooms, merely dwell in short offshoots from the main track that you can choose to tackle as you find them. *Tales of Kenzera* isn't the first Metroidvania to go light on exploration, of course, and others have proven there's nothing wrong with that when your level design is up to scratch. And the level design here is up to scratch, except a big reason why is that it doesn't divert much from patterns set by its predecessors. *Ori and the Blind Forest* in particular is an evidently close inspiration, while the colour-coded battling carries over from *Guacamelee!*, among others. As for the game's hazards, such as swinging weights and falling boulders, they could be entries on a checklist compiled by Indiana Jones.

Tales of Kenzera works because its methods are tried and tested. But it does work, and it's cloaked in such fascinating fiction that it's easy to get swept along even if you've played these notes before. While it may be somewhat eclipsed by other gaming legends, then, it would be harsh to deny Zau's tale its day in the sun. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Tales of Kenzera: Zau has tight design and compelling mythology compensate for a few too many borrowed ideas.

73



LEAGUE OF LEGENDS

Most people have left these lands, but you aren't alone

KALUNGA
It's unclear why the god of death needs Zau's help to retire the great spirits, but his word seems sound and he makes for a good spirit guide.

LIYANA
The last remaining resident of neighbouring village Ikakaramba, this young girl has a connection with Impundulu, the great spirit of the sky.

SABULANA
The shaman of the forest and an old friend of Zau. He finds her afflicted by sickness and his desperate attempt to save her may be a rash move.

ZUBERI
Living in the future, for Zuberi Zau's adventure is nothing more than a story in a book, but it will help him deal with his own father's demise.

BORING PLATFORMER

In a good way! The superb drilling of **PEPPER GRINDER** is sublimely chaotic

By Abbie Stone

Poor Pepper. She's the star of Devolver Digital's new platformer, but she would be laughed off the stage at the Annual Platforming Protagonist Awards. Not that she'd have much luck leaving that stage unassisted. Pepper's hobbled by a pathetic jump, a mediocre little hop that can barely get her a few feet off the ground. So it's a stroke of good fortune that she's rammed her arm into a drill attachment that can send her swimming through dirt, then use her momentum to burst out and fly through the air.

Well, maybe less 'good fortune', more 'mixed blessing' and perhaps even 'get this damn monkey's paw off of me'. It turns out that having a drill for an appendage can actually be quite cumbersome. Pepper drills through dirt a little faster than you'd like, demanding quick reflexes to move in something close enough to the direction you wanted to go, or at least a route that ideally doesn't end in certain death. This is all completely by design, of course, and gradually mastering such a joyously unwieldy method of navigation makes for a terrific little platformer.

Cumbersome as it can be, the drill is a delight to use

BUMPY RIDE

Cumbersome as it can be, the drill is a delight to use, with excellent rumble feedback. This is an absolute must-play with a controller, unless you own a vibrating keyboard (why do you own a vibrating keyboar... actually, I'd rather not know). Swimming through dirt feels great, as does introducing enemies to the sharp spinny end of your new toy.

Stages soon introduce a swinging mechanic and then they become an acrobat's nightmare of perfectly executed chains of swinging, drilling, and hurtling yourself around. There's even a speed boost that's tragically mandatory to execute some of the more distant jumps. Pepper has four slivers of health that can disappear in the blink of an eye and a tiny window of invulnerability after taking damage. Thank Christ there's no lives system and mostly generous checkpointing. Maybe a few more checkpoints wouldn't go amiss either, as some of the late-game levels boot you back far enough to have me fantasising about introducing the drill to the developers backsides, but now I'm just being childish. And creepy. Er, sorry.

Pepper Grinder breaks up this demanding platforming by offering you gloriously silly extensions to your drill arm. You'll occasionally find a gun with infinite bullets that turns the game into *Gunstar Heroes* with the cheats on. Even those sections play like *Elden Ring* compared to the giant mech suit that lets you smash through all the scenery. At first these sections feel like payoffs for surviving this far, a few seconds of cathartic, brain-off destruction. But later levels weave these gadgets elegantly into the challenge, taking advantage of how vulnerable Pepper is without them by contriving circumstances that keep separating you. A few minutes of panicky platforming are all the better for being punctuated with another go inside the mega death mech.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Hectic platformer where you travel via pneumatic drill

EXPECT TO PAY
$21.95

DEVELOPER
Ahr Ech

PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen Z1 Extreme, 16GB RAM, AMD Radeon Graphics (ROG Ally)

STEAM DECK VERIFIED
Yes

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
peppergrindergame.com

DRILL DAZZLER

Replayed levels have time trial trophies, a good way to test your navigation skills under pressure, though I suspect watching a speedrunner glide through this game will depress me enough to put my fingers in a retirement home. There are five collectable coins to be discovered in each level and I like that if I find one and then die later on, the game doesn't pointlessly punish me by making me collect it again. Among other rewards, these coins unlock a few bonus levels, adding a little longevity. There's a sticker album you can gradually fill out if you want to make your own little *Pepper Grinder* dioramas, and you can buy different haircuts and capes, but these are throwaway extras.

Which is honestly fine! It's not a long game – it took me about five hours to see the credits – but it's generous with ideas right up to those credits. *Pepper Grinder* is a short, sweet treat, a good idea executed with great energy. If you're looking for a 2D platformer built to last, get *Rayman Legends*. If you're up for a faster, leaner platformer, crammed with memorable moments (Pumpkin carving! Homage to King Kong! An absolute pig of a final boss!) Pepper's thrilling drilling adventure is well worth a spin. ■

WHAT A TOOL

Other great drills in PC games

VOLCANOIDS
This base-building FPS comes with the inspired twist that your base is a massive moving drill. Imagine sleeping inside a drill. Sounds, er, lovely.

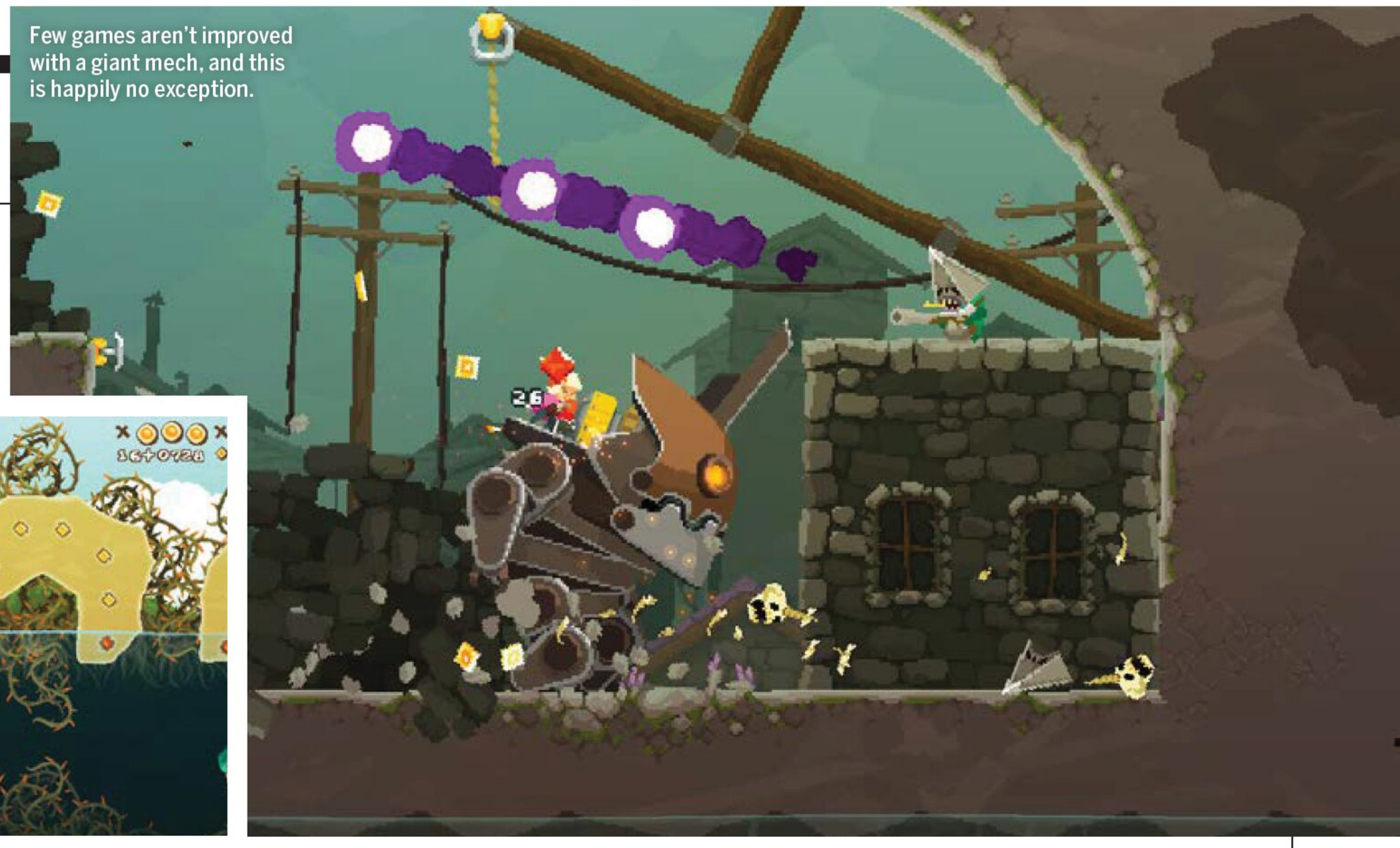
MR DRILLER DRILLLAND
Driller and his awful friends go to a drill-themed amusement park. Fun puzzle game, but the cutscenes will make you drill out your eyes.

BIOSHOCK
The monstrous Big Daddy, a collection of organs stuffed into a hulking diving suit, would be plenty terrifying enough *without* the drill appendage, frankly.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Pepper Grinder is five hours of fun with frantic platforming that's unwieldy and all the better for it.

80



FAR LEFT: Here's Pepper, about to take her 1,892,229th trip into the lava.

LEFT: Shoutout to the lovely map screen. The game's a real looker throughout.

BELOW: Let's hope this giant beetle isn't foolish enough to walk on all that land.

ALMOST INKREDIBLE

There's a terrific roguelike idea trapped in **INKBOUND**'s messy turn-based battles

By Abbie Stone

Turn-based *Hades*? Don't recall wishing for that with my cursed monkey's paw, but I'd trust the developers of the brilliant *Monster Train* with my first born. *Inkbound* never reaches those heights, but its best ideas have huge potential. It's an isometric roguelike wherein battles start with enemies surrounding you and kindly telegraphing exactly how they're going to attack.

You've got a limited amount of movement and attack power each turn to deal as much damage as possible, build up enough shield to block incoming blows, or move out of the way so you avoid them entirely. A number hovers over your head telling you how much damage you're going to take. Skull next to that number? Uh oh.

Positioning yourself to avoid damage in a turn-based strategy game can't help but remind me of *Into the Breach*. The genius of that game was in how clear and readable its little death dioramas were. You could have printed them in the puzzle pages of a newspaper. *Inkbound* not so much.

Area of effect attacks are shown by a circle displaying the impact zone. Direct, unavoidable attacks are arrows connecting you to the offending enemy. Attacks that see enemies charging you are an arrow with a rectangle around it. Fine in isolation, but when they're *all* in play, it can be like trying to understand the world's most cluttered, over-annotated Venn diagram of death.

You can play the game in online co-op, and the game pushes you in that direction, especially with its almost MMO-like hub where other players can be seen scampering between vendors. Occasionally fun, but that lack of clarity of information makes it difficult to keep track of what your friends are doing and why, and if anything more characters on screen only makes battles even less readable.

The world's most cluttered, over-annotated Venn diagram of death

But there is enough good in here to keep me coming back. You get four starter loadouts, with excellent opportunities for customisation during a run. You get three starting attacks, with space to obtain several more, and these can be augmented with bonuses like inflicting poison, giving you shield if you use them in a certain way, or increased area of effect. But it's the vestiges where the game starts getting clever, bordering on brilliant.

SMASHING IDEA

Vestiges are talismans that grant a specific boon, such as inflicting burning whenever you attack or granting bonus damage on your first turn. They also each belong to one or more sets – themed groups of vestiges. The more of a matching set you have, the more extra bonuses you unlock. So a vestige that adds bleed to your attacks, for example, will have Eviscerator as one of its sets, which grants bonus bleed damage if you have two of that set, buffs your attacks against enemies that are already bleeding if you have three, and heals you when you deal bleed if you have six.

Inkbound's cleverest twist is that it encourages you to smash your vestiges to bits. Destroy a vestige and you'll lose its core effect but permanently gaining double all its sets. Break a bleed vestige, for example, and from then on you'll always have at least two points in Eviscerator, as if you had two extra vestiges of that type.

It's often a deliciously difficult choice, because the vestiges you'll benefit most from destroying are likely to be the ones whose powers synergise most with your build, and you're often sacrificing power in the present in the hope that you'll build to greater heights in the future. The rarer and more powerful the vestige is, the more sets it belongs to, making your greatest and most irreplaceable treasures the most tempting targets for destruction. It feels like a genuinely new twist on roguelike character-building.

Exploring all those possibilities is where the game is at its best. But whenever I start to feel I have a really solid grip on my vestige strategy, that's when I inevitably hit some wall of a battle where I can't for the life of me figure out what I'm doing wrong. I'll definitely return to *Inkbound*'s well every so often to see how it evolves and hopefully improves, but though it has its clever charms, it won't be replacing *Monster Train* on my Steam Deck just yet. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A turn-based roguelike from the creators of *Monster Train*

EXPECT TO PAY
$14.50

DEVELOPER
Shiny Shoe

PUBLISHER
Shiny Shoe

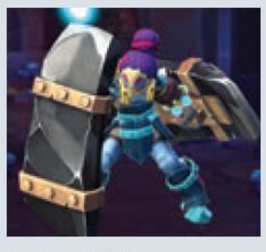
REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen Z1 Extreme, 16GB RAM, AMD Radeon Graphics (ROG Ally)

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

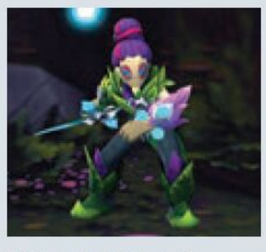
LINK
inkboundgame.com

MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD?

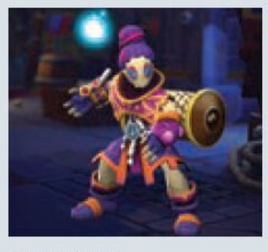
Meet a trio of Inkbound's starter loadouts



OBELISK
Uses two massive shields as offensive weapons. Pretty great starter choice, as his Building Block move is pretty crucial to survival.



MOSSCLOAK
Dashes through enemies to 'mark' them, then flings shurikens to hopefully finish the job. Great for moving long distances.

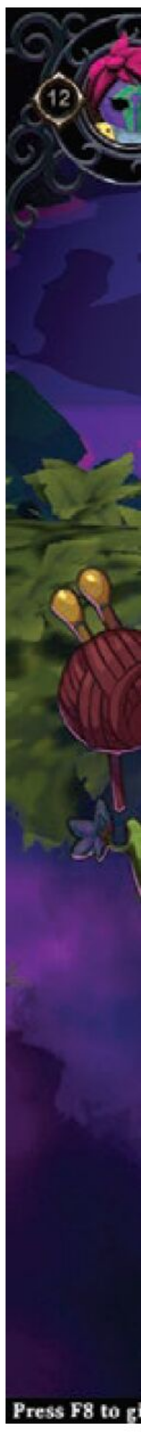


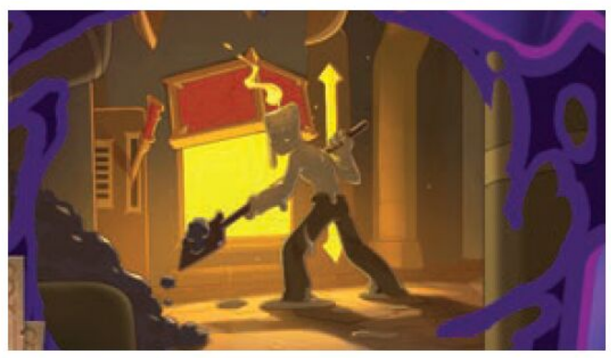
WEAVER
Weaves enemies together with threads for attacks that feel like they should be more rewarding. More like the weav-meh.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Inkbound is occasionally brilliant and often maddening. It's just a bit too messy to be a new roguelike classic.

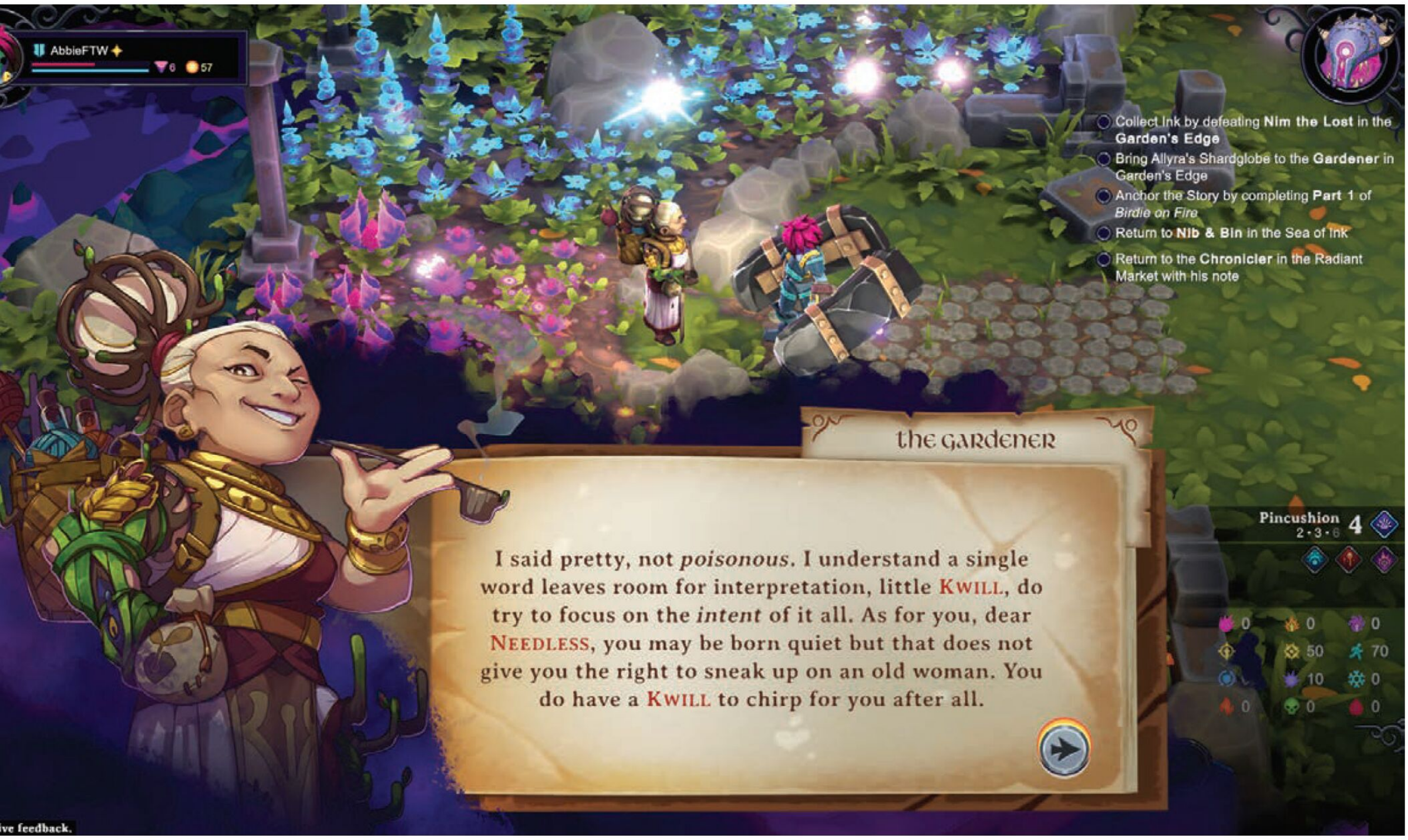
70





ABOVE: Boss fights make for some of the most fun encounters.

BELOW: Recurring characters can be encountered mid-run *Hades*-style.


AbbieFTW
6
57
Collect Ink by defeating Nim the Lost in the Garden's Edge
Bring Allyra's Shardglobe to the Gardener in Garden's Edge
Anchor the Story by completing Part 1 of Birdie on Fire
Return to Nib & Bin in the Sea of Ink
Return to the Chronicler in the Radiant Market with his note
the GARDENER
I said pretty, not poisonous. I understand a single word leaves room for interpretation, little KWILL, do try to focus on the intent of it all. As for you, dear NEEDLESS, you may be born quiet but that does not give you the right to sneak up on an old woman. You do have a KWILL to chirp for you after all.
Pincushion 4
ive feedback.

SUNDOWNER

Wipe out a cult with one bullet in CHILDREN OF THE SUN

By Tom Sykes

There are 11 cultists in front of me, and only one round in my sniper rifle. I don't need any more to near-instantly clear out entire compounds in this game of supernatural executions and flawlessly executed plans. My primary plan – as an ex-cult-member out for revenge – is to kill scores of anonymous cultists across stark, grungy levels until I can finally take out their leader. All I need is my rifle, one bullet and my telekinetic powers.

Planning is at the heart of *Children of the Sun*, as you scout out each stage and tag all the enemies, *Far Cry* style. There's no stealth element, however, as you're not actually moving around the level but running rings around its perimeter, from a place of safety. You have the telekinetic ability to move the bullet *after* it's been fired, and the main way you'll be expressing this is by flinging it from one exploded head to another.

But the order in which you kill enemies is vitally important. It's the difference between failing the stage or clearing it – and getting your username out of the bowels of the leaderboards. After you've initially fired the gun, you can only see what the bullet sees, and it's very easy to get into a position – once you've inserted it into someone's head – where there are no enemies in sight for the bullet to leap to. Miss at any point and you'll have to restart, mercifully with the enemies remaining tagged.

The order in which you kill enemies is vitally important

As you may have guessed, there's a heavy puzzle element to *Children of the Sun*, although certain abilities – and more resilient enemies – gradually dial up the amount of skill required to put your plans into action. The first power you acquire is to steer the bullet mid-flight – only a little, but enough to swerve around obstacles, or make sure you're hitting vital enemy weak spots.

The second ability, Re-Aim, essentially lets you do a U-turn in mid-air, while Power Shot lets you ramp up the bullet's speed to kill armoured enemies. Later levels, once you've unlocked all three powers, make you feel a telekinetic god.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A sniping puzzle game in which you control a bullet with your mind

EXPECT TO PAY
$21.95

DEVELOPER
René Rother

PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
devolverdigital.com/games/children-of-the-sun

TAKE THE SHOT

That amazing feeling quickly crumbles when you look at the leaderboard and see your name at 557th place, but these are levels meant to be played multiple times. You can start a stage from anywhere – from any*one*, I should say – and usually make it work, although more powerful enemies have certain criteria that need to be met first.

Begin the stage from the opposite side and you may discover an immobile car, that you can explode and use as a stepping stone, or a flying bird you can leap to for a new perspective on the scene. At times you feel like Corvo Attano, chaining awesome powers together in a *Dishonored* sandbox, although there is less flexibility here when things go wrong. It's all too easy to reach a dead-end, or miss an enemy's weak spot by a couple of pixels and lose the currency you need to pull off an essential Re-Aim. It's this inflexibility – the inability to think on your feet

ABOVE: One level is dedicated to an infuriating *Pac-Man*-esque minigame.

Shoot an enemy, and you can then re-shoot the bullet.

You start outside the level, with no danger of retaliation.

ABOVE: Moving cars are hell, even with your slow-motion powers.

FAR RIGHT: The top-right number shows how many enemies there are.

and recover from fuck-ups – that makes it difficult to feel a sense of triumph when you do succeed. You're following a plan, and you've finally achieved it through sometimes painful repetition. It's not a sense of exhilaration so much as *relief*. Though that's not to devalue the thrill of scouting out a level and testing your plans, before you set them in stone.

The final level in particular is like a heist, as you pop heads to lower magical barriers and gradually make your way towards the heavily guarded leader. Here, everything you've learned builds to a crescendo: a moment of transcendent mastery, even if I was screaming at my laptop a lot of the time.

But where do you go from there? Where can you go, after mastering a game? You can master it *better*, improving your scores on previous stages, but when half those stages feel like training grounds, I don't feel terribly compelled to look backwards. This is a game crying out for challenge levels – for more stages that give you your full suite of powers. After finishing it, I feel like I'm just getting started. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Children of the Sun is a killer puzzle game that tests your skill, and patience, as you perform elaborate gun-fu.

71

ROUND ABOUT

A bullet's eye view of the level

1 GETTING A HEAD
Shoot these weak spots, as they charge up uses of the Re-Aim power.

2 TIME TO KILL
Your score depends on factors like how many times you've fired.

3 NUMBER CRUNCHING
Tagged enemies become numbers, with the colour showing the type.

A HEROIC ENDEAVOUR

The spirit of adventure sings in EIYUDEN CHRONICLE: HUNDRED HEROES

By Baxter Burchill

Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes has a lot weighing on its shoulders. The new turn-based RPG has to deliver to crowdfunding backers, fulfil its promise of being an ode to '90s great _Suikoden_, and prove that its all-star creative team still have the stuff. That's enough pressure for anyone, but recently it's been further burdened by the death of its director Yoshitaka Murayama. It's amazing, then, that I couldn't feel an ounce of all that weight during my time playing, because _Eiyuden Chronicle_ is as sturdy and vivacious an adventure as anyone could ever hope.

Mainly following Nowa, a young man thrust into leadership of a rag-tag alliance fighting against the empire, the setup reads almost like parody. How clichéd can you get? It also probably gives anyone familiar with Murayama's *Suikoden* series a serious case of déjà vu. The setup was tropey even then, but what's important isn't radical originality or constant subversion. It's the way this familiar structure and story is told, and *Eiyuden Chronicle* tells it with supreme confidence.

Nowa might be the protagonist, but *Eiyuden* is a true-blue ensemble story, a war epic filled with political treachery and a massive cast of well over 30 plot-significant characters.

A massive cast of well over 30 plot-significant characters

The narrative has no problem drifting away from the main team to peek in on the villains or switch playable characters for a while, constantly making it known that Nowa isn't the centre of the story. Take the Guardians, a group living deep in the forest whose own lives intersect with Nowa's several times. Their culture and characters are enough to fill an entire game by themselves, dealing with clan politics, attempts at colonisation, and their deep relationship with the game's magic system. Stacked on top of the politically twisty main plot, these threads could easily overwhelm with a mess of names and ideas. But thanks to killer character writing, it never feels like too much.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A throwback RPG from industry legends packed with over 100 recruitable heroes

EXPECT TO PAY
$75.95

DEVELOPER
Rabbit and Bear Studios

PUBLISHER
505 Games

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 PRO 4650G, 16G RAM, AMD Radeon Graphics

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
shorturl.at/agmM4

Each character is wisely defined with simple strokes, motivation and personality always so clear that even at its most complex, there's never any question about who stands where. That they're all deeply lovable certainly helps: more than once someone I thought was just a one-off side character would show up hours later in the middle of a high-octane climax and have me jumping out of my chair, celebrating as if I just beat the hardest boss in the game.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

This expands well past the thrust of the main story: true to its title, there are over 100 characters to recruit and are they ever characters. Magical girls, '80s delinquents, robots and talking capybara – the crew is a smorgasbord of delightful weirdos, turning the world into a kitchen sink fantasy ruled by imagination over grounded realism. Concise writing strikes a delicate balance between clearly defining character traits and encouraging you to fill in your own details. It's an old-school approach, but the result of this brevity is a world of constant, childlike discovery, one that invites daydreams and imagined conversations. *Eiyuden* feels all the more personal because of it.

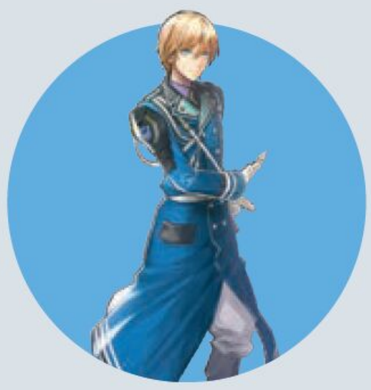
Most of your time with these oddballs will be spent in huge turn-based brawls with a six-person party against up to eight enemies. Battles are more concerned with party composition and turn order than exploiting status effects or enemy weaknesses, evidenced by Rune-lenses – equippable abilities and passive buffs – and an auto-battle option that comes with minute AI customisation for every single character. It's the kind of game where prep is king and the winner is decided before the fight even begins.

In theory, at least. In practice the default setup is tuned a little too well. On the normal difficulty I was able to auto-battle my way through nearly everything without a thought. Fights

LEADING THE PACK

Eiyuden's primary hero characters up close

NOWA
Nowa soon finds himself recruited into the military of the League of Nations, tasked with recruiting heroes to battle the evil Empire.



SEIGN
The second son of House Keeling, a powerful Imperial family, Seign is an exceptionally gifted warrior and strategic mind.

MARISA
A member of the Guardians, a clan that protects the sacred forests of Allraan. She is a versatile warrior and has a pet creature called Pooby.

FAR LEFT: Paying close attention to the turn order can be key in battle.

BELOW: Large scale battles feature troop manoeuvring and then simulated battles.

The game's Runebarrows act as dungeons.

FAR RIGHT: At key story moments you get to engage in epic one-on-one duels.

BELOW: Now THAT is how you insult someone. Wowzers!

Francesca
Don't make me go over there and BREAK YOU, you gropey little pasty-faced, pigeon-licking, garbage-breath PUNKS! Go fall off the motherforsaken map! YEAH?!

still have personality, though, with unique AI settings highlighting personality quirks with clever touches. The violent healer Francesca prioritises attacking, converting SP – gained each turn to use skills – into magic buffs, while the strategist Melridge focuses on spells and damaging large numbers of enemies.

Everyone expresses themselves differently, but the result is always delightfully big. Two feisty girls try and fail to seduce a horrifying flesh monster, a rabbit dressed like a wizard gets punched into the atmosphere, a horde of zombies are blasted with giant hearts – there's a surprise at every turn. It all hums along nicely, battles acting as breaks in dungeons filled with puzzles and a gentle encounter rate.

A rabbit dressed like a wizard gets punched into the atmosphere

Even outside these dozen-person scraps *Eiyuden Chronicle* is bursting at the seams. Armies are pit against armies in simplistic grid-based strategy battles, and heroes against villains in cinematic one-on-one duels. You'll go fishing, have a boat race, play cards with friends. By themselves none of these are particularly complex, but instead promote a propulsive rhythm to the game, highlighting narrative beats to create an emotional synthesis between play and story. Just as everything seems to be going the alliance's way the empire launches a surprise attack, and suddenly I'm in a boss rush, then a minigame, then a heart-stopping duel, then controlling an entirely new character. Every five hours culminated in a fist-pumping climax that had me saying, "God I love videogames," out loud to no one. And once the dust settled and I could breathe again, I cooked a meal with characters I'd grown closer to.

PIXEL ART PERFECT

All of this is propped up by a charming blend of 2D sprites and 3D environments. Obviously borrowing from Square Enix's HD-2D style used in games like *Octopath Traveler*, with an aggressively narrow depth of field (mercifully toggleable in the options) and intense lighting, it delights in a retro style without being completely beholden to it. I noticed some slowdown in larger towns, but otherwise the game gave me no issues.

Due to the game's simplistic, retro sprite art style, there isn't really much that is tweakable in terms of graphics options. You've got a host of strictly 16:9 resolutions, such as 720p HD, 1080p HD and 2160p 4K, among a few others, as well as the ability to play the game at 30 or 60fps. You can tweak shadow complexity too, but really that's about it. There are cloud saves, though, and as you would expect *Hundred Heroes* is perfectly Steam Deck compatible, so moving between playing the game at home and then while on the go is seamless.

The only slightly frustrating thing is that graphical option choices seems to be tied to the cloud saves, meaning that they carry over no matter which device you're playing on. This means that if you can play the game at 4K 60fps on one system, but don't have the graphical grunt to do so on another, you'll have to drop into the menu each time you play on the weaker system and turn down the settings until you get a optimised framerate. In an ideal world you'd have per-system settings saved. This is a small point, though.

Maybe the whole *Hundred Heroes* experience is best summed up by yet another system: the alliance's headquarters, a run-down town slowly built up over the course of the story. You'll build hot springs, a theatre to put on shows, a library to dig into lore, as long as you find the right person for the job. It's a fun way to create a persistent sense of progress, but the real joy is in the people who settle there. Once after a brutal defeat I wandered around my makeshift town filled with everyone who had joined me during my adventure. They all talked about how proud they were of me, of how they knew I would do my best and how they would support me because we're all in this together. It's the kind of corny power of friendship optimism found in a hundred different games and anime, and yet it almost made me cry. Because I believed them. I'd laughed at their hijinks, struggled with them in fights, bonded with them in moments of quiet and imprinted so much of myself onto these simple, wonderful, canvas-like characters.

By itself no single mechanic in *Eiyuden Chronicle* is anything special. Alone, a person might be powerless. But together? Together they can snowball into something truly amazing. Yoshitaka Murayama's death was a tragedy. He was only 55 years old, clearly gearing up for a new, exciting period of his life. Like any loss of a creator I admired, it feels immense. At the very least, I hope he knows that he was able to leave us with something special in *Eiyuden Chronicle*: not just a thrilling RPG, but a rousing, beautiful ode to people. ■

BEASTLY BUDDIES

A spotlight on some of Eiyuden's more animalistic heroes

GARR

Garr is a Beastyn warrior, stemming from a clan that makes their living as hired mercenaries. They are known for their brutality in combat.

GAROO

Garoo sells his services for coin. He has lost an eye in battle and is on a quest to find a cure for his daughter's debilitating illness.

YUFERIOUS VII

A Shi'arc guard captain, Yuferious VII hails from Impershi'arc, his people's desert nation. He is known for his defensive capabilities.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Eiyuden Chronicle is a joyous adventure and fitting swansong for one of Japan's great RPG directors.

85

Akira Toriyama's monsters are as distinctive as ever.

FAR RIGHT: Aerodynamic? No. Brilliant anyway? Definitely.

BELOW: Ann can build pretty much anything with the right materials.

TANKS FOR NOTHING

SAND LAND's another disappointing case of Licensed Anime: The Game

By Kerry Brunskill

What year is it? Because this action RPG feels like a return to the bad old days of forgotten adver-games, the sort of thing that included a bit of everything. At times it'll force a platforming section on me, complete with bottomless pits to avoid. Or I'll have to hit buttons at the right time like QTE-ruined cutscenes never went out of fashion, or grit my teeth through multiple stealth sections. Multiple stealth sections.

Which is a pity because when I'm not gaming like it's 1999 there's a definite charm to the game's imaginative selection of vehicles, encompassing everything from bulbous tanks to gigantic battleships. Bashed-up trucks might have a balancing pair of back legs that only set down when the vehicle comes to a stop. Tanks rear up slightly whenever they gain a sudden burst of speed, and lighter vehicles bounce around as they navigate uneven terrain. I can almost feel how hefty these machines are just by looking at them.

Anything I can drive can be built and then customised in a garage, creating new weapons, new engines, or even attaching specialist extra functions. Once that's sorted these machines as a whole, as well as their individual parts, can then be upgraded further, or have new parts swapped in as required.

Anything I can drive can be built and then customised in a garage

So it's a shame this core part of the game is about as much fun as taking a car to a real mechanic. Each new vehicle requires an increasingly long list of materials to create, and at times the plot will grind to a halt until I build one very specific machine. Item descriptions like "can be obtained from a variety of vehicles" are frustratingly unhelpful when I need just to build a bike that'll help me speed across a desert's worth of quicksand. I had little choice but to wander off and hope for the best.

At least it doesn't take any time at all to hop around the map, thanks to the game's generous fast travel system. Any major town or health-restoring water station I've already visited automatically becomes a free teleportation point, so the chances are when someone says, "Maybe we should go to..." it'll only take a few clicks.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Toriyama's beautiful mechanical designs trapped inside a tired marketing exercise

EXPECT TO PAY
$89.95

DEVELOPER
ILCA, Inc

PUBLISHER
Bandai Namco Entertainment Inc

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-13900HX, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4080

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
en.bandainamcoent.eu/sand-land/sand-land

BONE DRY

Unfortunately, wherever I end up, the vehicles find another way to disappoint. I may be able to bring up to five of them with me at any time, but they all serve very narrow roles. The obstacles I encounter always have just one bot-based solution to them, and sometimes that particular bot is only needed for a few seconds before I'm better off switching back to my trusty tank.

Enemies will try to pick a fight as I poke around, and I'm free to either attempt to punch them into submission, hop into something more substantial and take them out that way, or just boost straight past them.

Battles rarely require me to do anything more demanding than make sure I can hit the enemy more often than they hit me, and pinpoint-accurate shots at weak points just aren't relevant here, nor is anything as obvious as trying to focus my attacks on a tank's treads to stop it moving possible.

At least the game's likeable rag-tag cast of stereotypes and the eco-conscious story they're tied up in do their best to liven things up. Yes, hoarding natural resources for profit and war are bad, and *Sand Land* should say it. The messages get a little lost when the only response I have to anything is to blow it up with a tank, but it does try.

It's not enough to save something that plays like the definition of a licensed anime game though. *Sand Land* definitely looks the part, but the game underneath is never anything more than a collection of unsatisfying bits and pieces. This take on Toriyama's sandy setting is destined to last in people's minds about as long as an ice cube in the desert. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

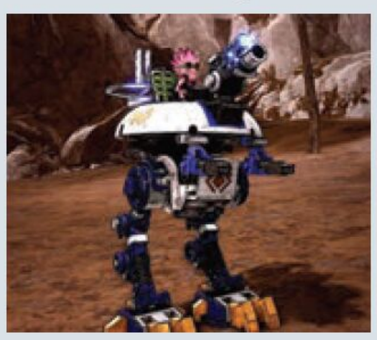
Akira Toriyama's *Sand Land* is just another forgettable tie-in to add to the existing anime game pile.

65

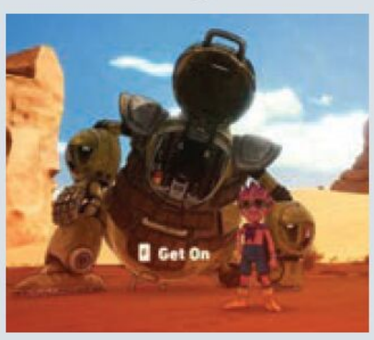
NO TANKS

Sand Land's got some unusual ways to dish out damage

MOTORBIKE
A two-wheeler that's sleek and swift. The shotgun turret was a pleasant surprise.



JUMP-BOT
Jumping and stomping define this bipedal bot. Oh, and an infinite supply of grenades.



BATTLE ARMOUR
As much fun as heavy artillery can be, nothing beats a rocket-powered punch.

CRUST-ACE-EAN

The Soulslike and platformer mix wonderfully in ANOTHER CRAB'S TREASURE

By Abbie Stone

The most fun I've had with a Soulslike since *Elden Ring*. The less self-serious take on the genre I wanted Lies of P to be. FromSoftware should just go ahead and cancel *Shadow of the Erdtree*... OK, now we're moving from possible hyperbole to outright lies. But I honestly stand by the first two. *Another Crab's Treasure* is a joke game that takes being a great Soulslike seriously. A charming, creative platformer with terrific combat and a good eye for both pretty scenery and silly sight gags.

You're a hermit crab called Krill who's had his shell stolen by a literal loan shark (ho ho). So begins an oceanwide quest to get it back which involves hitting a lot of hostile sea life with a fork. Apparently there's no stamina underwater so all you have to worry about is getting as many hits in as you can then leaping out of the way before being hit back. Actually, that's a pretty big worry considering how vulnerable poor Krill is without his shell.

Luckily, there are replacement shells everywhere. They're able to block a few attacks before shattering, forcing you to quickly scurry to find another. This might sound tedious but it's actually one of the game's best ideas. Shell's have unique powers. A sushi roll gives appalling defence, but you can chow down on it mid-battle to restore health. A rubber duck can be thrown to act as a decoy while you scamper away. There's loads of great ones to find, and because they break so easily, you're encouraged to try them all.

Combat does a fine impression of *Dark Souls*' sword fighting, with every enemy having a health bar to cut down and another *Sekiro*-like bar that, once filled up, gives you a chance to stun your foe. It begins to truly sing once you unlock the grappling hook, letting you yank enemies towards you for a good forkin'. Delightfully, to successfully hook bigger prey you'll have to nail a fun little fishing minigame which mixes surprisingly perfectly with Soulslike swordplay. Master it and boss battles become brilliant tug-of-wars with a lovely sense of flow to them.

Combat does a fine impression of Dark Souls' sword fighting

SHALLOW END

It's a lot more welcoming than most Soulslikes too, with lots of smart difficulty modifiers in the settings. In fact, with its cute characters, bright aesthetic, and approachable difficulty, I wondered if I was potentially playing the first Soulslike for younger gamers. Until one of the crabs started talking...

Now, you don't write for PCPP unless you have a fondness for puns. I spent hours of the only life I'll ever have thinking up awful ones for the strapline of this review (Dark Soles, Seakiro, Blubblubborne, Elden Herring...). So I consider the astonishing number of puns in *Another Crab's Treasure* a feature, not a bug. But I'm far less enthralled with the script's tiresome habit of 'hiding' swearing with puns. We're talking constant substitutions of 'crab' for 'crap' and truly crab lines like "coddamn shipshow". A later boss just started outright saying "aw shit". Not every cutesy game has to be a Pixar movie but this adult dreck still feels tonally off with the rest of the game.

The visual jokes, however, are constantly delightful. The treasure map that drives most of the plot is a children's maze on the back of a cereal box. Lobsters charge at you like knights on horseback except they're using toilet brushes as jousting poles. One of the difficulty options is 'give Krill a gun' which turns his shell into a one-hit-kill handgun (OK, admittedly, that's an adult joke that lands).

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Undersea action platformer with ace Soulslike combat

EXPECT TO PAY
$44.95

DEVELOPER
Aggro Crab

PUBLISHER
Aggro Crab

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5 12500H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce 4060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
aggrocrab.com/games

SOAR SUBJECT

Happily, it's also a good platformer, a challenging jump-'em-up where you dread the combat bits for the right reasons. It's a little janky – I wouldn't say no to a patch that stops me occasionally getting stuck in the scenery – but I mostly loved leaping around its hostile waters for secrets.

Doesn't hurt either that Krill is a lovely lead crab. He cries "no no no no no!" when you let yourself get hit by an unblockable attack and cheers whenever you level up, instantly making a crab the most relatable Soulslike protagonist of all time. He's optimistic, sympathetic, and even has a nice little character arc. He's yet another pleasant surprise in a game full of them. Shipshow? This is actually krilliant! God I hate myself.

DARK LOLS

The game is full of gags. Good ones? Well...

SILLY SHELLS
The writing is hit and miss, but watching Krill waddle about in the sillier shells made me smile.

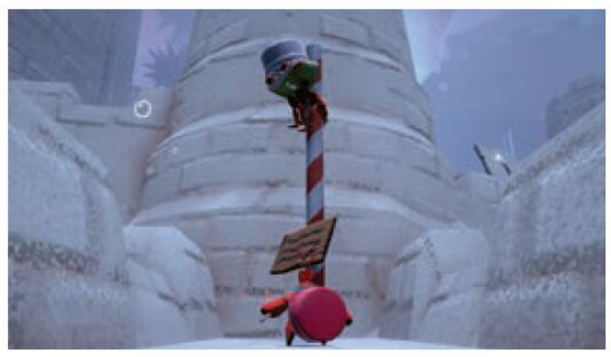
RECYCLING
The crabs love the junk we're giving them. I would also like a dress made from a silica gel packet.

MARIO SMOKES
We're sure Nintendo is delighted to see a game with this in it also being released on Switch.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

A terrific action platformer that's a seaworthy mashup of platform game and Soulslike.

80



FAR LEFT: While never as beautiful as *Elden Ring*, the game's art style gives it a nice identity of its own.

LEFT: Most of the digs at capitalism are about as subtle as being punched by Bernie Sanders.

This thriving city made of discarded trash is the main hub.

FISH TALE

HAROLD HALIBUT plays things too safe for its own good

By Joshua Wolens

H*arold Halibut*'s most enduring running gag is about a Turkish soap opera called Sonsuz Ask. Ardent fans will try to sell you on it – just wait for it to really pick up in season 22 – but the hard truth is that you'll have to endure a lot of long, barren stretches before you get to the good stuff. Even in space, you probably have better things to do with your time. *Harold Halibut* has a lot in common with Sonsuz Ask.

You are Harold, the unsophisticated, sincere and (literally) wide-eyed handyman aboard the good ship Fedora I, which has been stuck at the bottom of an alien ocean for 50years after a solar flare knocked it out of the void. Harold is a dreamer and an optimist, an open and honest soul who people naturally confide in.

Which they do regularly. Most of your playtime is spent walking between conversations, and most of those conversations consist of people unloading their burdens onto Harold's shoulders. The shopkeeper needs someone to talk to about his marriage, the ship's captain feels unprepared for his role, and someone simply must repair the relationship between a quartet of receptionists who I can only describe as possessing a 'bus conductor genotype'.

The game shies away from making any of its characters too villainous

WHERE'S HOME?

On and on it goes as you guide Harold between chats in which people choose to make their neuroses the plumber's problem. It's not without charm: Slow Bros clearly has affection for its characters. Combine that with the game's impressive handmade claymation-esque art style that dovetails nicely with its school-play-like delivery – and you have a recipe to pique my curiosity.

But those chats often have the feeling of an after-school TV special: sweet, simple themes and morals, delivered clearly. It gets fatiguing, and all the stranger because you catch occasional flashes of a more daring game hidden underneath.

Every so often, I'd find myself gradually shutting down as this or that conversation dragged on, only to be jolted into alertness by a phrase like "anarcho-syndicalist hacktivist collective" a discourse about the aesthetics of Christ, or a Turkish rendition of Bella Ciao suddenly kicking in as Harold gets political. But that bolder game is only glimpsed.

Some of those chats are optional. A determined player could mainline the game's central plot and ignore its sentimental side-roads, but the issue is that *Harold Halibut*'s story seems almost determined not to start. The pacing is off, and would be that way even if you didn't take an hour to go do the optional task where you read a bunch of people's private letters with the postman.

I spent the first two chapters – several hours of real-life time – waiting for something to happen, for one plot branch or another to bear fruit. The game lays down track for all sorts of interesting plots, from the sinister corporation that runs the ship to the underground cell of rebels that opposes it, but the game shies away from making any of its characters seem too villainous or putting any of them in danger.

For instance, there's a point at which the sinister corporate CEO uncovers a secret Harold has been keeping, a pivotal plot moment that seems like a real threat. And then it all just kind of works out for the best, because even the game's grasping capitalists seem to fundamentally have their hearts in the right place.

It's frustrating, fatiguing, and a shame, because there are things to like here. The hand-crafted art style is an untrammelled success, and the game's '70s British kids TV show aesthetic almost manages to justify how sweet and safe the entire thing feels. Almost...

By the end of my time with it, I found myself wishing for the *Harold Halibut* that occasionally poked its head out: the one that broke into West German jazz apropos of absolutely nothing, that made genuinely funny jokes about politics and philosophy, and that was in general much more willing to linger in those strange asides. Instead, it spends most of its time lingering in conversations that eventually wore out their welcome and in a plot determined to play it safe. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A claymation-y narrative adventure set on a stranded spaceship.

EXPECT TO PAY
$50.95

DEVELOPER
Slow Bros

PUBLISHER
Slow Bros

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 3700x, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4080

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
slow-bros.com/harold-halibut

YOUR CREWMATES

A few citizens of the Fedora I

PROF MAREUX
Harold's stern, brilliant, but caring mentor.

CYRUS
Mareux's prickly rival. Certified genius, #1 dad.

ZOYA
Captain of the Fedora. Not much to do under the sea.

THE CEO
CEO of the All Water corporation that controls the ship.

CHRIS
Harold's friend. The ship's teacher. Absurdly handsome.

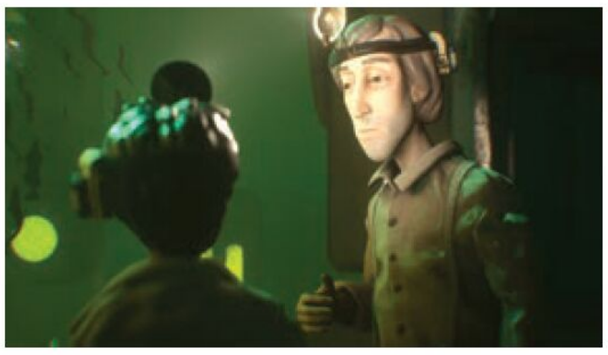
THE SECRETARIES
Quadruplets who all chose to pursue the life of a receptionist.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Harold Halibut's great art style and flashes of brilliance never make up for a meandering, risk-averse plot.

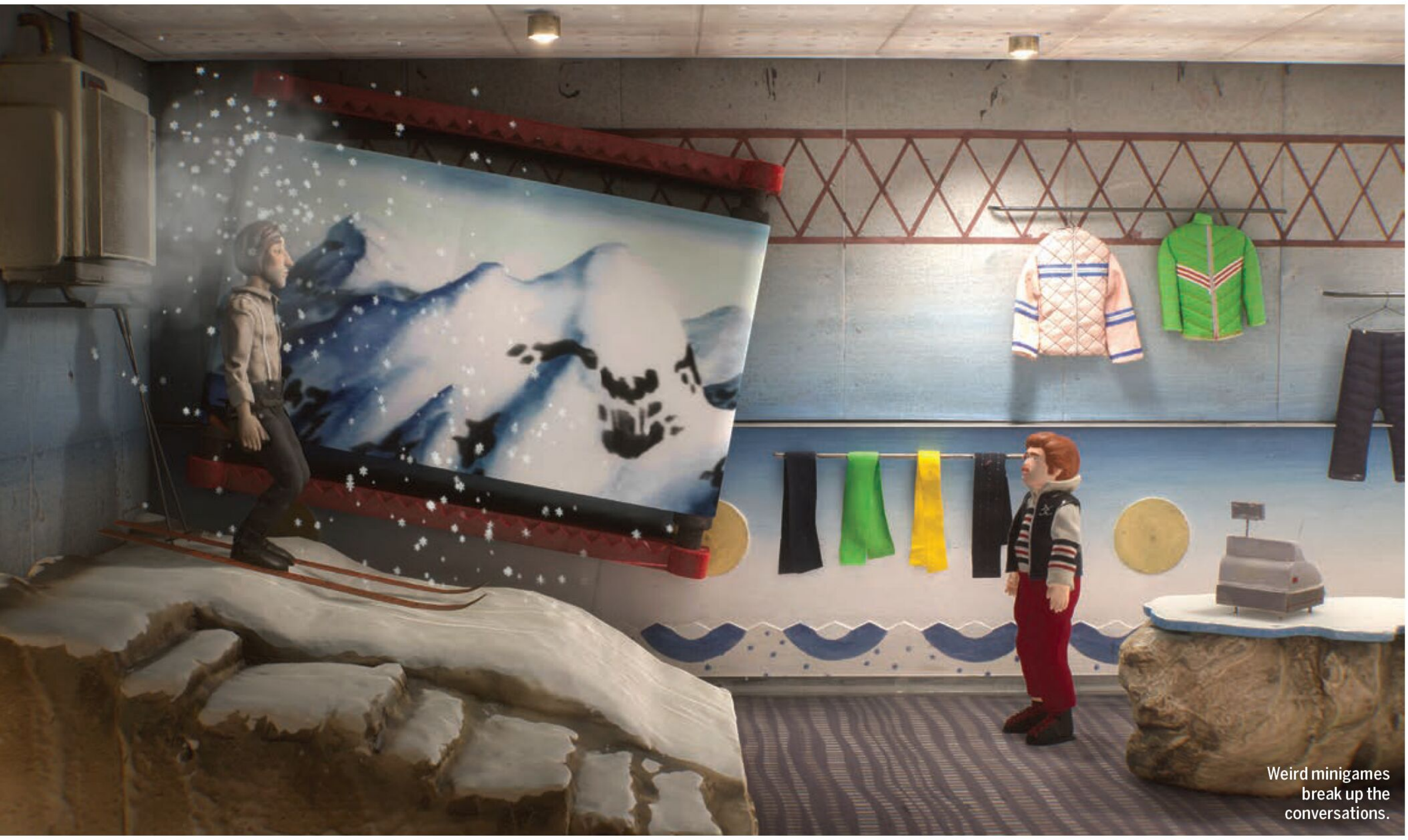
60

Chats like this make up most of the game.



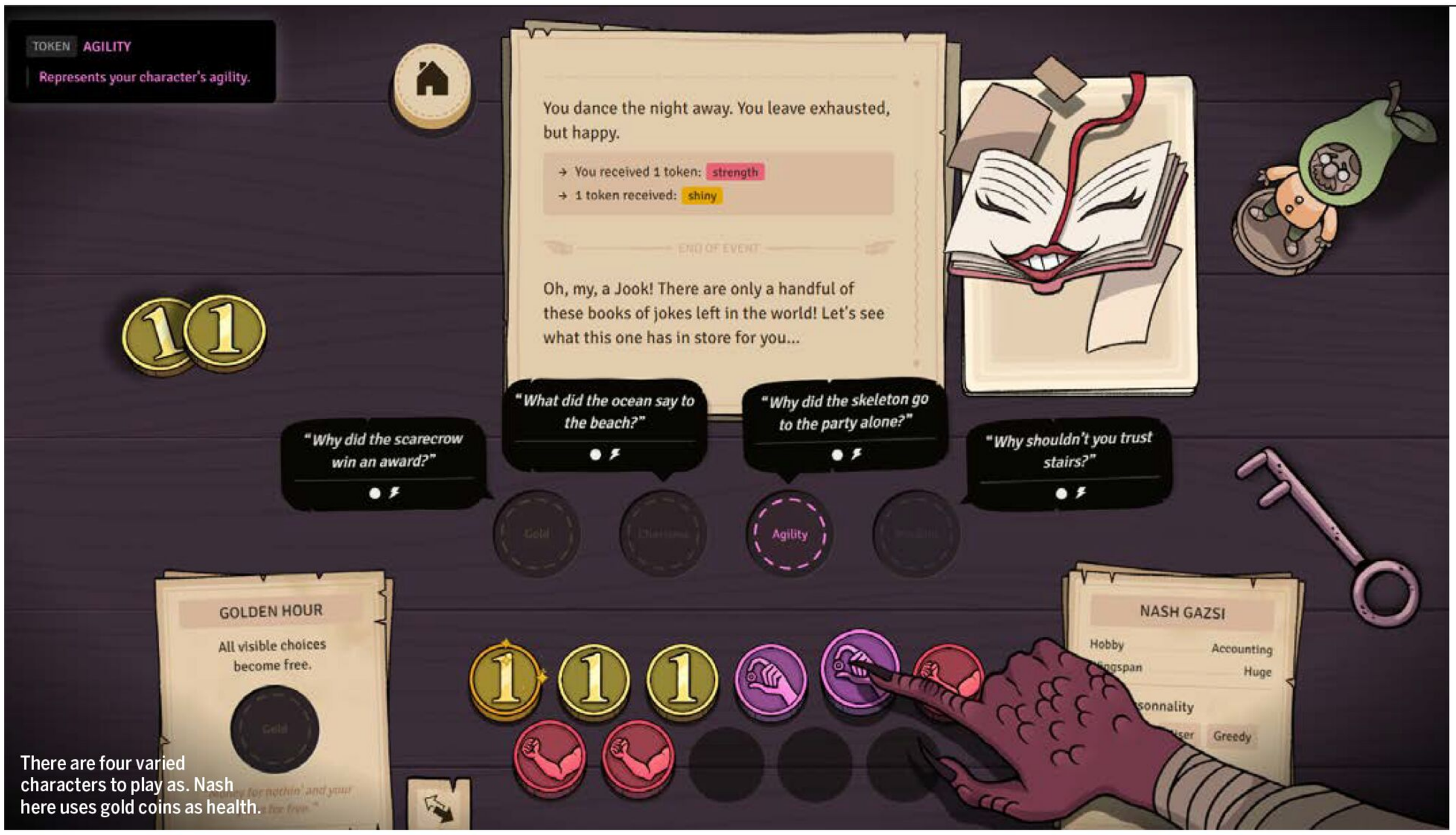
FAR LEFT: The game's weirder moments are genuinely charming.

LEFT: Harold has an Arthur Morgan-like notebook full of sketches.



Weird minigames break up the conversations.

COOL TITLES FOR NO CASH by Tom Sykes


TOKEN AGILITY
Represents your character's agility.
You dance the night away. You leave exhausted, but happy.
→ You received 1 token: strength
→ 1 token received: shiny
END OF EVENT
Oh, my, a Jook! There are only a handful of these books of jokes left in the world! Let's see what this one has in store for you...
"Why did the scarecrow win an award?"
"What did the ocean say to the beach?"
"Why did the skeleton go to the party alone?"
"Why shouldn't you trust stairs?"
Gold
Agility
GOLDEN HOUR
All visible choices become free.
NASH GAZSI
Hobby
Accounting
Huge
Greedy
There are four varied characters to play as. Nash here uses gold coins as health.

COUNTER INTUITIVE

PICK & POKE your way through this gorgeous tabletop roguelite

There's just something about playing with tokens – chunky, circular tokens – that makes any game better, whether it's Backgammon, Draughts or Connect 4. *Pick & Poke*, I'm pleased to report, is a game entirely about moving tokens around, as you drag them onto choices to make your way round a fantasy city. A singleplayer roguelite, it has the spirit of a tabletop RPG. It's even played on an actual (OK, a virtual) tabletop.

Oh but what a table it is, enriched by those multicoloured tokens and the big cartoon arm you use to drop them onto dialogue boxes. It really feels like you're playing the game in a tavern somewhere – the decorations even wobble when you poke them.

Pick & Poke was made in a week for the 7-Day Roguelike challenge, but it's far removed from the usual procedural ASCII mazes. The world map nodes appear to be randomised, so too the order that the text-based events will appear, but you'll cover a lot of familiar ground as you ultimately die and restart with one of the other characters.

But what does one of those events look like? Well, a blob of narration and dialogue, culminating in a couple of decisions to make, which call upon your character's strength, agility, wisdom or charisma. There are no numbers here, however – you either have the required ability tokens or not. If not, you can always use one of your precious health tokens instead, sacrificing your HP to continue the game – but for how long?

I had so much fun managing all these tokens

Spent tokens are expended when used, so it's best to keep a varied stable in your cruelly limited inventory. Fill it up and the game is even crueller, by triggering an encounter with a guard who sees your purse and frisks you in the street. You can swat him away with bribes – or take the hint and try not to hoard tokens. It's an elegant way to enforce resource management.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A narrative game in which you make choices by dropping tokens onto them

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Christophe Coyard et al

PUBLISHER
Christophe Coyard et al

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/PickPoke

DRAGON DROP

I had so much fun managing all these tokens – acquiring power-ups that gave them special effects, or negative status effects that piled on the pressure – that I only had half an eye on the text, which is so breezy and incongruous that I don't think it wants more than half your attention anyway. But there are some cute, funny characters, and beautiful cartoon artwork to appreciate, in a game that has a cosy fantasy feeling.

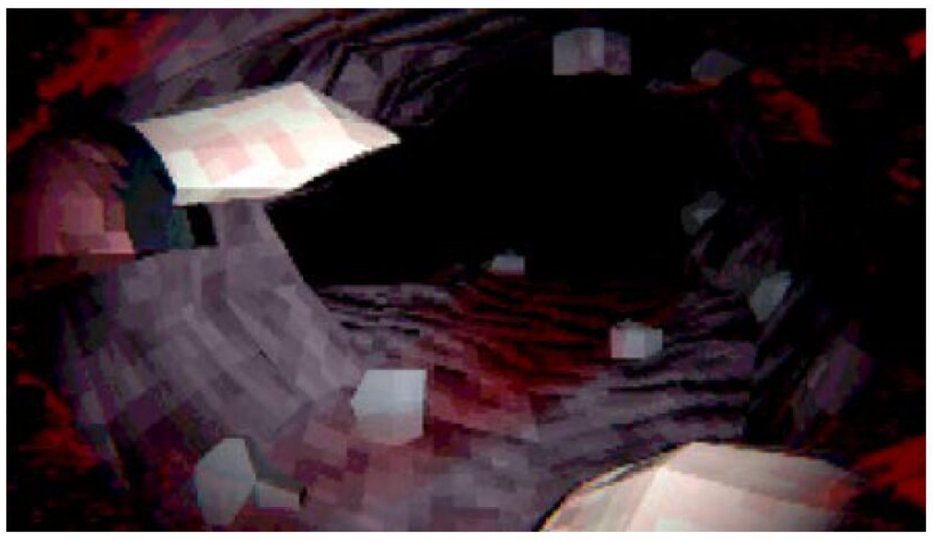
My only real complaint is that I don't think there's a way to win. I reached the final map node a couple of times, with two of the four character classes, and died suddenly both times when I'm sure I still had health tokens remaining. Hopefully I just missed something – or it could be a hurried ending to a game made in seven days – but the journey towards it is certainly worth your time. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

A beautiful, tactile game that adds a welcome element of physicality to a simple role-playing text adventure.

80

BELOW: The river of blood might be a clue that something is wrong here.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Sole Rift	bit.ly/Crawl

THE DESCENT

Look who's come crawling back in horror game CRAWL

I can think of few things worse than shuffling around in a cramped, pitch-black cave, which of course makes it the perfect setting for a horror game. Here you're crawling, literally crawling on your belly around a dark, spooky cave with only a map, camera and wind-up torch.

That last bit is not strictly true, as there are also creatures that regard you as dinner, but you can fend them off by stunning them with your old-fashioned camera. Every tool is wonderfully cumbersome: to use anything you have to twist around and pick it up off your jacket, meaning you can no longer see in front of you. It only takes a few seconds to wind up your torch, when it eventually fails, or reload your camera with a new cartridge, but you better believe it feels like minutes when you see one of the gangly monsters pass by in your periphery.

The aim of the game is to get photographic proof of the people that went missing in the cave, though quite why you don't back the hell out of there when you encounter a monster is never explained. You can't actually crawl backwards, or strafe left or right. All you can do is hold W and aim with the mouse to clumsily steer slightly. If you do need to return to an area, you have to find a looped passageway to agonisingly turn yourself around.

It really feels like you're caving – or how I imagine it in my head at least – although I hope real spelunking has fewer moments where you get hung up on the scenery. That's ultimately a small imperfection in the jewel that is *Crawl*. It's a sweet slice of horror. ■

75

FINGER FOOD

Discarding your hand in gory card game LIMB FROM LIMB

There's a simple, repetitive card game at the heart of *Limb From Limb*, but as the name suggests, with a grisly flourish that adds a layer of queasy tension. Every time you draw the wrong card, your character chops off a finger. Lose all five from your left hand and you lose the match.

It's certainly an incentive not to draw the 'death' card – as you and your similarly chop-happy opponent take turns to flip over five cards from your decks – but in a game of random chance there isn't much you can do to mitigate it. Items bought from the shop allow you to X-ray unflipped cards, regrow fingers or force your rival's choices, but you still have to flip over every card until one of you loses all your fingers, even if you can see that there are death cards lurking among them.

There are only three possible cards to turn over: 'safe' cards that don't do anything, death cards that force you to reach for the knife, and jokers that can theoretically sway the game if multiples are found during one match, but in reality are much too rare to ever activate. There is definitely tension in turning them over – the relief of flipping over a safe card, or the gory thrill of watching a finger come off after you reveal the rarer death card.

Fights occur as you slowly traverse a 3D game board, and they're the same every time, with an identical enemy and no deck variation. *Limb From Limb* is maybe not one to finish, but there's an enjoyably ghoulish atmosphere tacked onto its OK card game. If you've finished *Inscryption*, have a look at this next. ■

55

BELOW: Flip over the wrong card and you're forced to chop off a finger.

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Spineless Studios	bit.ly/LimbFromLimb

GROUP TEST

MICROPHONES

A good microphone can be the difference between a professional sounding triumph, or a crackly, tinny disaster

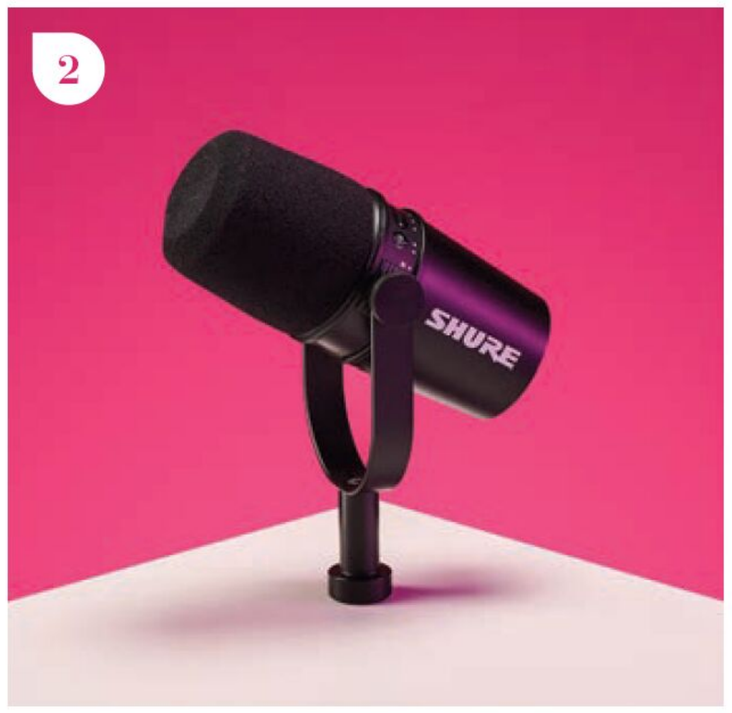
By Andy Edser

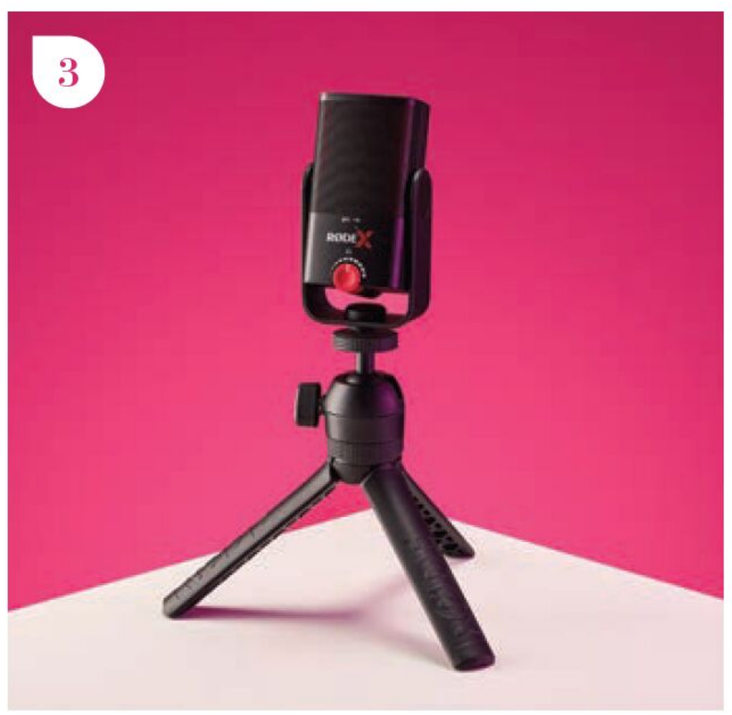
Group Test

Capturing great vocal audio from your PC used to be a bit of a teeth-clenching experience. Esoteric cables, strange terminology, and fiddly equipment once made the process a lot more difficult than it needed to be. Luckily, there are now many easy-to-use microphone solutions on the market at a range of price points, taking the stress out of capturing top-quality sound.

Whether you're looking to break out as the next streaming sensation, finally start that podcast, or simply want to improve the audio in your daily meetings, a good microphone will take your audio to the next level.

However, with a wealth of options to choose from, finding the right mic for you can still be a bit of a conundrum. Here are six microphones that might fit the bill for supremely smooth sounds and eardrum-tingling audio.





Alias

STEELSERIES $399

Premium contender

1 For most uses, a good cardioid desktop mic will capture a great vocal sound, providing it's got a quality capsule. The SteelSeries Alias certainly has one of those, but also comes nestled in its own supportive shockmount, meaning table bumps and vibrations are much less likely to make an appearance in your audio. The slim design means it doesn't take up too much room on your desk either, and with a robust aluminium construction the Alias doesn't only feel the part, but looks it too.

The Alias has a clear, rounded sound, and picks up well at a distance while maintaining some mid-range weight to your vocals. Combine that with the SteelSeries Sonar AI-noise correction software, and you have a relatively set and forget solution. The downside here is the price, as those just looking for decent audio quality may well be better off with a cheaper unit. Still, the little Alias has some impressive tricks up its sleeve, and build quality that feels solid and dependable.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → **Good sound capture**
- → **Compact design**
- → **High price**

SPECS POLAR PATTERNS: CARDIOID / **CONNECTIVITY:** USB-C / **SAMPLE RATE:** 96KHZ / **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 50-20,000HZ

MV7

SHURE $399

Professional assassin

2 Those that have been around the audio game for a while will be very familiar with the Shure name, as it's been cranking out professional microphones for years. Listen to some of your favourite tunes and chances are at some point you'll be hearing a Shure microphone at work.

The MV7 is Shure's attempt at nailing a podcast audio mic in one easy swing, and in terms of sheer audio quality, it's knocked it out the park. Warm, slightly crispy vocal audio is the MV7's forte, although what it really likes is getting up close and personal. It's a shame that it doesn't come with a desktop mount – although you can buy one separately – but I'd highly recommend a boom arm and a pop filter to get it up close where it does its best work.

The MV7 can be used both as a USB mic and as an XLR unit with a separate audio interface, so top marks for versatility too. It's a pricey option, but if you're looking for audio that sounds truly brilliant, the Shure MV7 makes a great pick.

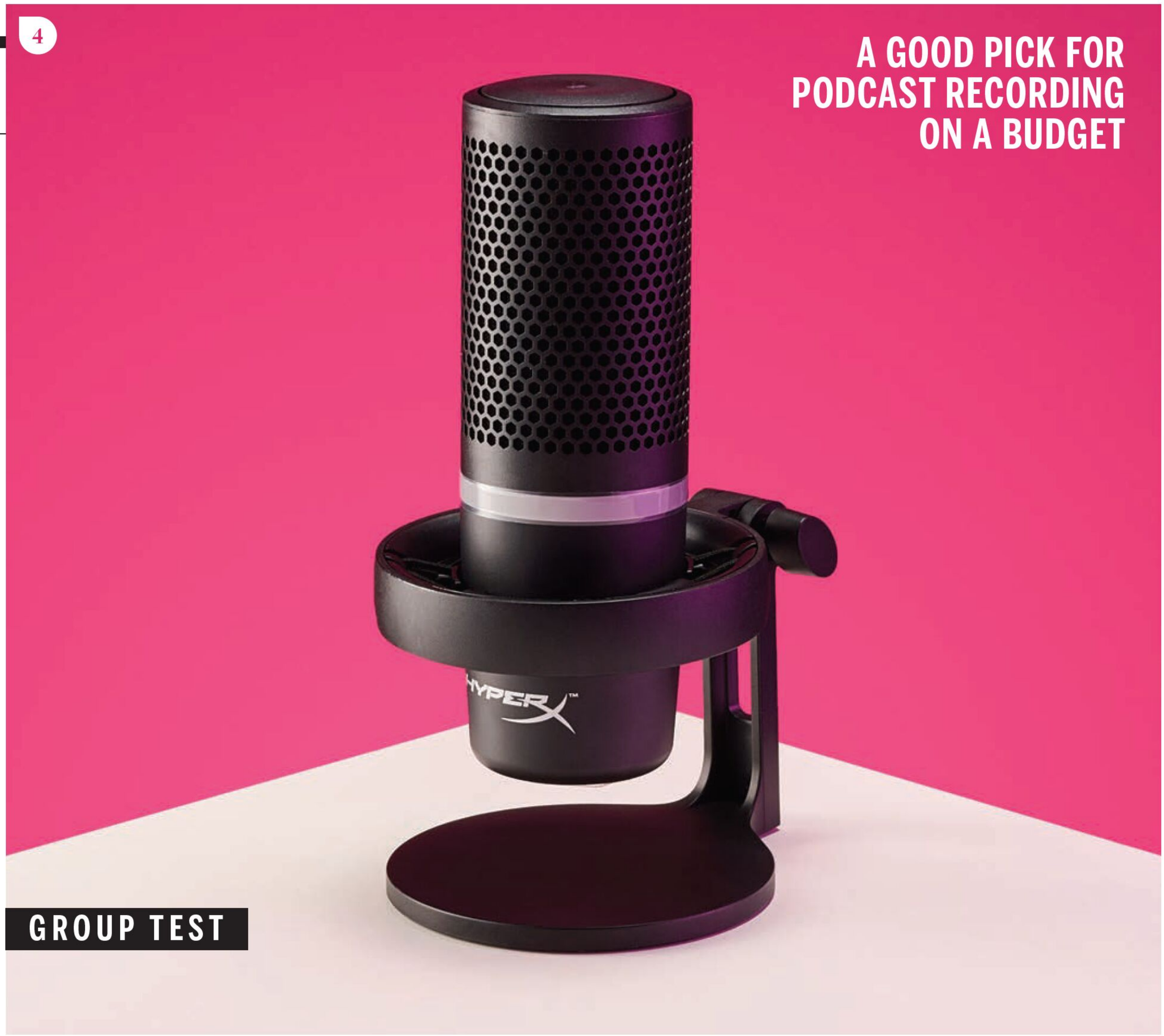
PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → **Superb, professional-sounding audio**
- → **Versatile**
- → **No mic stand included**

SPECS POLAR PATTERNS: CARDIOID / **CONNECTIVITY:** USB-C & XLR / **SAMPLE RATE:** 48KHZ / **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 50-16,000HZ

4

A GOOD PICK FOR PODCAST RECORDING ON A BUDGET



GROUP TEST

XCM-50

RODE X $219

Small but mighty

3 Everyone likes a compact piece of hardware that punches well above its weight, and the Rode X XCM-50 is just that. Tank-like construction and the addition of a solid tripod mount that folds into an easily transportable tube means this mic feels like a very tough piece of kit. It's not just the build quality where the XCM-50 shines either. It captures a toasty-hot sound with a nice level of crispness and isn't prone to plosives or hissy sibilance, while the Unify software gives you plenty of mixing options. The red front-mounted dial with a hidden mute button is a nice touch too.

The slight let-down is that tripod stand, which, while reassuringly sturdy, only has two levels of height adjustment, and even at its tallest it still takes up a fair bit of your desk footprint despite the diminutive size of the microphone itself. It's also a bit heavy, even for such a small mic unit. Still, the little Rode impresses as a heavyweight contender in a compact package.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → Pleasingly crisp sound
- → Built like a tank
- → Stand could do with more adjustment

SPECS POLAR PATTERNS: CARDIOID / **CONNECTIVITY:** USB-C / **SAMPLE RATE:** 48KHZ / **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 50-20,000HZ

Duocast

HYPERX $129

Light touch

4 The HyperX Duocast is flexible, in more ways than one. As the name suggests, you have the option here to switch between two polar patterns, traditional cardioid for single-user recording, and omnidirectional for recording multiple speakers at once.

That makes it a good pick for podcast recording on a budget, providing you're prepared to huddle around it for the best capture. It'll also add something of a vibe to your recording sessions, thanks to an adjustable RGB ring around the bottom of the mic unit itself. Sound-wise the capture is excellent, with a clear and crisp pickup no matter which mode you have the mic in. The Ngenuity software allows you to play around with audio and RGB options and the top-mounted tap-to-mute feature works well. However, the fly in the ointment here is the flimsy construction. The stand feels plasticky, and the mic wobbles around easily in its shockmount. Still, it's relatively cheap, and the sound quality is not to be sniffed at.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

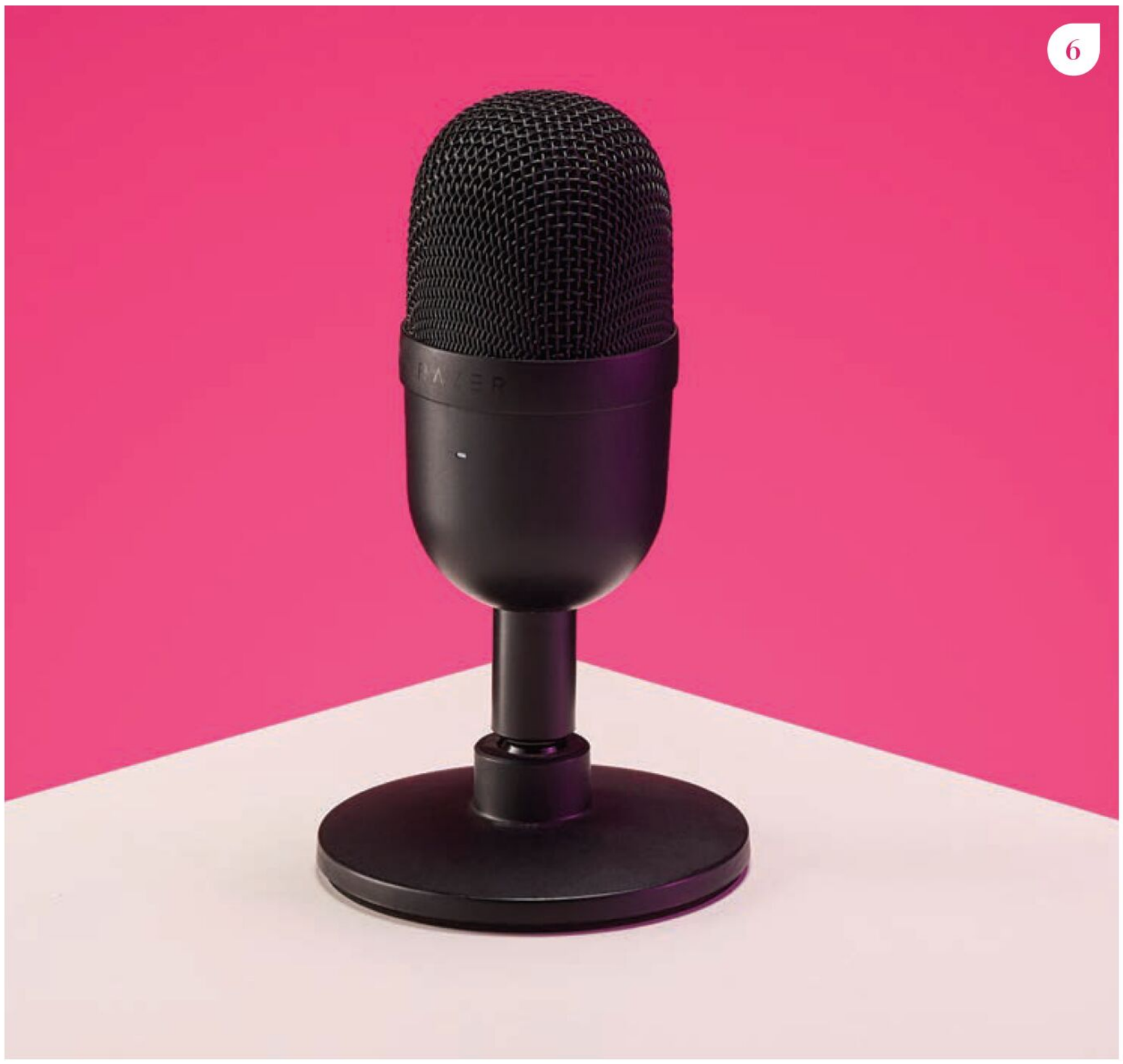
- → Crystal clear sound
- → Choice of pickup patterns
- → Flimsy stand and mount

SPECS POLAR PATTERNS: CARDIOID/OMNIDIRECTIONAL / **CONNECTIVITY:** USB / **SAMPLE RATE:** 96KHZ / **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 20-20,000HZ

GROUP TEST

FEELS LIKE THE SORT OF GEAR YOU'D EXPECT TO FIND IN A PROFESSIONAL STUDIO

5



MICROPHONE POLAR PATTERNS EXPLAINED

Cardioid
This polar pattern captures a heart-shaped area of sound around the front of the mic, making it resistant to background noises and resulting in a usable vocal signal.

Supercardioid
A supercardioid pattern captures a slightly narrower 'bubble' of sound at the front of the mic, while also picking up a small amount from the rear for added depth.

Bi-directional
A bi-directional pattern captures audio from both the front and the rear of the microphone, which is perfect for two people talking into the same mic from either side at the same distance.

Omnidirectional
These microphones have the same sensitivity from all directions, making them great for capturing a whole room or multiple speakers at the same time.

XDM 100

RODE **$439**

Huge and hefty

5 The Rode XDM 100 is a serious bit of kit, and that becomes obvious the second you hold one. It's supremely well-built, and feels like the sort of gear you'd expect to find in a professional studio. It also comes with an excellent pop-filter, and a substantial shock-mount to keep it isolated.

What's missing here is a stand, as the XDM 100 expects nothing less than a substantial boom arm to hold itself aloft, and you'll have to buy that separately. Much like the Shure MV7, this is a mic that likes to get close to capture all the fidelity it can, and if you bring it near you can expect stellar vocal capture, warm tones and sparkly highs.

This is far too much microphone for many users, but those of you looking to get serious about audio quality without investing in an XLR mixer will find all you need here. There's a single USB-C port for connectivity and some robust gain and headphone controls, but when it comes to pure audio chops, it's got you covered.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Immensely well-built
- Warm and focused sound
- More than most will need

SPECS **POLAR PATTERNS:** CARDIOID / **CONNECTIVITY:** USB-C / **SAMPLE RATE:** 48KHZ / **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 20-20,000HZ

Seiren Mini

RAZER **$65**

Super smol

6 The Seiren Mini is all about delivering a no fuss microphone at a bargain price without compromising on the audio quality. Razer has cut all extraneous elements from this diminutive microphone while still using the same essential components from its higher-price Seiren range.

That means you get the same quality of audio capture – though with only a solitary supercardioid pattern – but without any extra features. That can be both a blessing and a curse depending on what you want. If you're after just a good desktop mic to use instead of your dodgy headset mic it's great, but if you want more control for more serious use then the lack of volume, gain, or even a mute button will be a frustration. There's no option for a boom arm mount, either.

For me, being able to just plug it in and go without having to think about it at all, makes it my favourite budget gaming mic bar none. And it comes in different colours, too, which has got to be a win however you look at it.

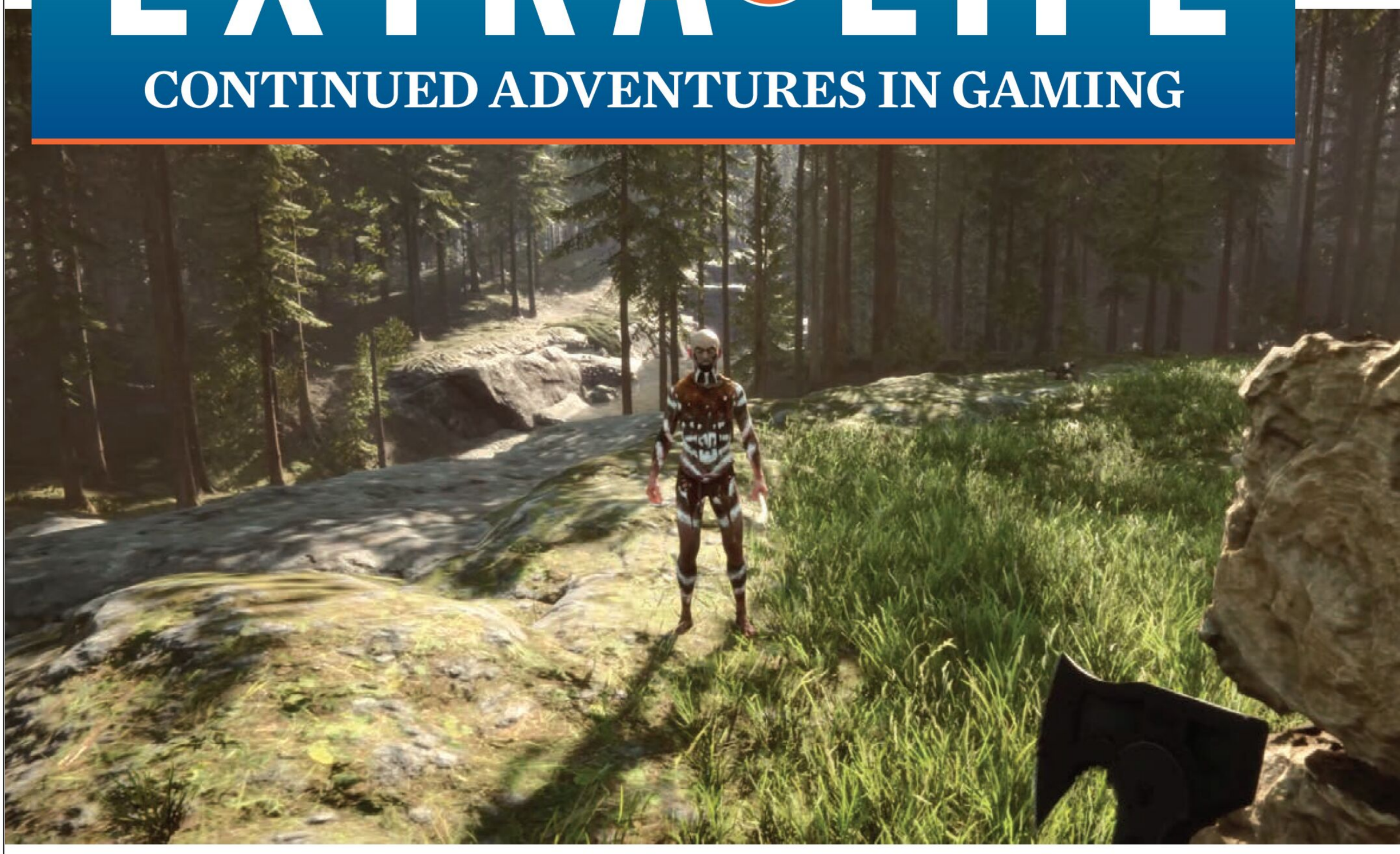
PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Plug and play
- Bargain price
- No on-mic controls

SPECS **POLAR PATTERNS:** SUPERCARDIOID / **CONNECTIVITY:** USB / **SAMPLE RATE:** 48KHZ / **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 20-20,000HZ

EXTRA LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



"Beggars can't be choosers when you're starving, cold and slowly dying"

SONS OF THE FOREST is just Escape to the Country with cannibals

I'm nothing if not a perfectionist: I travel for days in *Minecraft* to find the right spot to lay down foundations for a house, and figuring out where my base will stand in *Subnautica* is infinitely more stressful than dealing with the Ghost Leviathan. So when I crash-landed on the peninsula in *Sons of the Forest* with a few of my friends, I knew agreeing on somewhere to build our settlement would be tricky.

There's a lot to think about before picking a prime real estate location in a survival game. Are you close to water? Is there enough protection from the harsh environment? Where are the boundaries between warring cannibal tribes? You know, the usual big questions for first-time buyers.

ELIE GOULD

THIS MONTH
Fought off cannibals to break into the housing market.

ALSO PLAYED
Stardew Valley, The Outlast Trials

After weighing up all of these queries my group and I decided to locate close to a river in a natural clearing.

All was going well – we sent Kelvin off to deforest the local woodland, and I started building a modest hut that would see us through the night. But darkness fell all too quickly, and with only one medium-sized wall and a campfire that Kelvin had made away from the site, we were sitting ducks.

It didn't take long for the cannibals to arrive. First, there were only a couple of bloody shadows that hung back in the bushes, but soon more came in search of a midnight snack, and, in trying to get to us, they obliterated our humble home.

TOP: He hungry. You food.

Cannibals attacked from every side as we threw logs as defence and desperately tried to tell Kelvin that he could not lie down and rest in the middle of a pitched battle. In the end, we abandoned our campsite and floated around in the river until the cannibals lost interest and retreated back into the woods.

But beggars can't be choosers when you're starving, cold and slowly dying of exposure, so once we came across a massive clearing in the

WITH ONLY ONE MEDIUM-SIZED WALL AND A CAMPFIRE, WE WERE SITTING DUCKS

middle of the forest, next to a cliffside, we decided that this would be as good a place as any. This time, our base was more than just a small-ish wall and a fire. We built cabins, flower beds, defensive walls and even a bone chair.

FOILED AGAIN

It wasn't meant to be. We soon discovered that, somehow, we'd managed to build right on the edge of two warring cannibal tribes who apparently made peace over trying to kill us. What started with the odd cannibal staring at me as I tended to our crops ended with a massive blood-red monster breaking down our walls and ruining my blueberry bushes.

There's only so much you can do with a repair tool, so after a couple of gruesome fights, we decided that home-ownership wasn't for us and a life on the road would be less of a hassle. This turned out to be the best decision we could have made. Unlike *The Forest*, *Sons of the Forest* encourages you to be more nomadic. With no home to go back to, we ended up exploring more areas of the peninsula and had an even better time trying to figure out the strange story that was left for us to uncover. ■

Nalia
My... my home. My father... what is left? Someone has done this... but who...?
1: I take it that my job here is done! Am I free to leave now?
2: I cannot ease your pain. I have done what I could, but there is little else for me to do here.
3: I feel as though my work is not done. I could not save your father, and I am sorry.
4: Sorry that I can't stick around to figure it out. You did say something about a reward?
5: I have done what I can. Might I expect a reward? I do not mean to appear crass.
Don't worry, Nalia, I'll help.

"TorGal had died badly"

Reclaiming the de'Arnise Hold in BALDUR'S GATE II

ROBERT JONES

THIS MONTH
Went butt-kicking for goodness!

ALSO PLAYED
Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes, *Manor Lords*

Lanterns flicker in the throne room's now dark, gloomy and shadow-filled environs. Whatever former glory this grand reception room had is now long gone, with de'Arnise banners strewn across the dirty, blood-covered floors and a pungent smell of death emanating from a pile of burning troll corpses littered around its central throne. Slumped against it is former lord of the de'Arnise Hold, his corpse cold.

Hero of the hour, Volin de Taranbrace, slowly draws her two-handed weapon, the lethal and magical Sword of Chaos, from the chest of the biggest troll of all, TorGal, who had died badly. There was never any place for troll filth within these walls, though, and Volin along with trusted companions Minsc, Jaheria, Yoshimo and now rightful heir to the Hold, Nalia, have kicked butts for goodness and freed the castle. Albeit, freed it as the cost of Nalia losing her father.

CLASSIC QUESTING

So ends one of the most memorable quest lines in the superlative *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn*, a game that I've started replaying for the umpteenth time since, finally, walking away from its multiple award winning successor, *Baldur's Gate III*. And, each and every time I revisit the de'Arnise questline in this game, which pleasingly becomes available incredibly early on in the adventure, I'm reminded of just how well built it is and how iconic it has become in the history of DnD quests.

Starting simply in an Athkatla inn with a plea for aid by Nalia, requesting assistance in helping her to save her family and reclaim her ancestral home from forces of evil, soon the player finds themselves sneaking in to, exploring and then fighting through a huge besieged castle that itself is littered with secrets, from reassembling long-lost powerful weapons, to fighting magical creatures, and all while the well-written, character-driven narrative unfolds. Even when you finish the main quest, in the right conditions your involvement with the de'Arnise Hold continues, with you acting as its owner and overseeing its redevelopment. The de'Arnise Hold in *Baldur's Gate II* is truly RPG questing at its finest. ■

"They're not just nailing the genre, they're defining it"

Watching the auto-shooter genre evolve in **DEEP ROCK GALACTIC: SURVIVOR**

It's always fascinating when you get to watch a new game genre emerge and evolve – over my life in gaming I've gotten to see it with the MOBA, battle royale, tower defence and more. For the last few years, the defining example has been auto-shooters – a genre so new, in fact, that we've not even really settled on that name yet.

What I'm talking about is *Vampire Survivors*-likes. The indie hit enjoyed huge success, and spawned countless imitators, thanks to the simple format, other developers have been able to put out their own spins on the genre in record time, giving it a kind of hyper-accelerated evolution.

I could list great auto-shooters for days – favourites of mine include *Renfield*, and *20 Minutes Til Dawn* – but for me the one that's leading the pack, and helping the genre feel more developed and complete, is *Deep Rock Galactic: Survivor*.

ROCK AND STONE!

Spinning off from beloved co-op shooter *Deep Rock Galactic*, *Survivor* takes the same core concept – space dwarves mining for gold on an alien world while hordes of bugs descend on them – and perfectly reframes it for a top-down roguelike experience.

Destructible stone that you can dig through but most bugs cannot allows you to tactically shape the environment to your benefit; secondary objectives and valuable mineable resources give you goals to frantically chase beyond just battling bugs; supply drops that offer powerful buffs but that can only land if you clear the area beneath them encourage you into tense and risky encounters. All of it adds a much greater depth to the core auto-shooter experience.

Each of the four classes of dwarf has three further subclasses, effectively offering 12 playable characters, and they all offer very different playstyles. As a Foreman Driller, my focus is on burrowing through rock, hoping to gather as many resources as I can, while as a Weapons Specialist Gunner I take the fight directly to the bugs. Lately I've been having a blast with the Sharp Shooter Scout – he starts with a sniper rifle, and any overkill damage he inflicts causes a shrapnel explosion around the target. Popping one tiny bug so hard it takes out ten of its buddies at the same time... that's satisfaction.

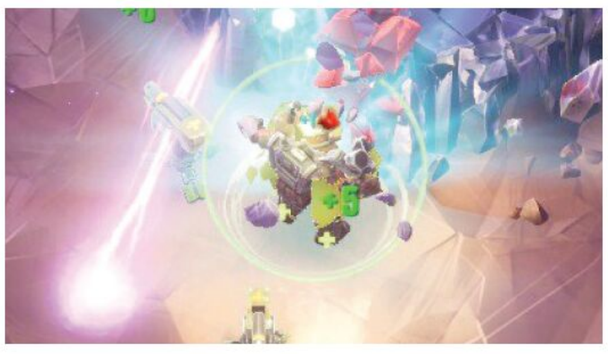
There was plenty of cynicism around when *Survivor* was announced – as a spin-off of a popular game and a take on a newly popular genre, it was perhaps understandably viewed as a quick cash-grab. But after 30 hours in what is still just an Early Access build, I can confidently say Funday Games isn't just nailing the genre, it's defining it. ■

ROBIN VALENTINE

THIS MONTH
Killed more bugs than a fumigation tent.

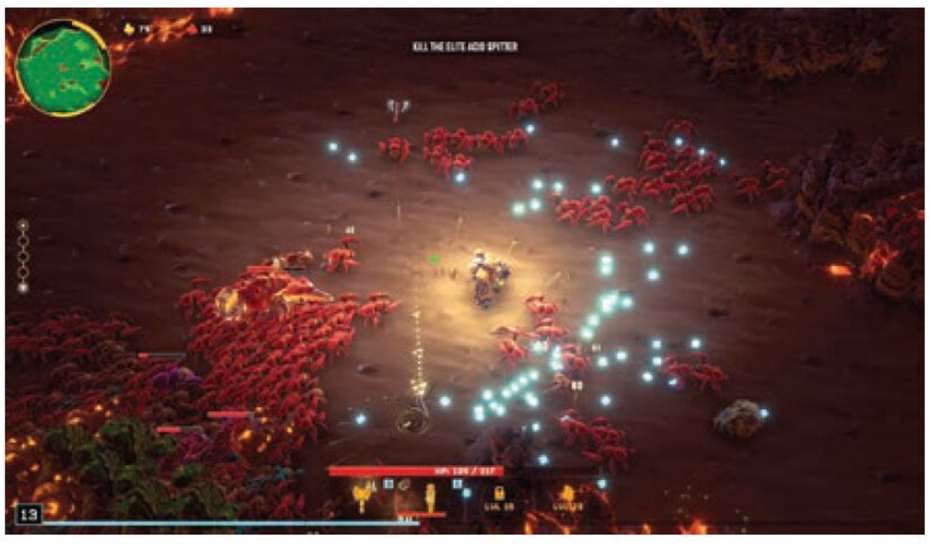
ALSO PLAYED
Dragon's Dogma 2, *Balatro*

ALL OF IT ADDS A MUCH GREATER DEPTH TO THE CORE AUTO-SHOOTER EXPERIENCE



LEFT: Each level is peppered with gold, Nitra, Red Sugar, and other helpful resources.

BELOW: XP has to be physically collected off the ground.



"I've earned enough to buy myself a motorbike and a sentient aubergine"

Why a slow life on an Island Sanctuary isn't always what you expect in FFXIV

DANIELLA LUCAS

THIS MONTH
Tried out farming, but ended up growing a minion empire.

ALSO PLAYED
Atelier Ryza 2, Mail Time

Now that all of the *Endwalker* patches have finished and *Dawntrail* is approaching, *Final Fantasy XIV* has entered its quiet season. With no new raids to chase or story to complete, it's a time for catching up on things you might have missed or pausing and playing something else for a while. It may be quieter, but with that the game also feels more chill – there's no expectations to rush through anything any more. The boom season is over and now it's time to relax. And what better way to cure all the aches of a Warrior Of Light than to revisit your personal island and till the soil.

Island Sanctuary is a casual content mode that first launched in patch 6.2 and sees you farming and gathering to shape your island to your liking. I tried it when it first launched and found it to be a bit more of a grind than I was expecting, with a lot more managing to earn Sea Cowries than I would have liked. Since then it's been updated and has gone from maxing out at level 10, to doing so at 20 and has added the ability to customise it with furnishings. Now that things had gotten quieter I decided to give it another shot, and finally found the peaceful home I had been looking for.

HERD WORK

It felt like such a nice change to just slowly pootle about collecting logs to make some buildings for my base area. I had a little veggie patch to grow things, and a paddock of increasingly bizarre animals to tend to. This being a game within another game, the loop of gathering and crafting is pretty basic, but the slow pace of it all felt relaxing.

I'd been flying up the levels from five to ten and now had granaries and workshops at my disposal, allowing me to send tiny minions (robots, basically) to go gather things for me and make things for me to sell and earn more Cowries.

I had started this endeavour to feel the relaxation of farm work, but somehow found myself as a factory boss. Now I log in to tell people what to do and sit back while I watch them do it. Despite the Machiavellian nature of it all, I'm somehow more relaxed. Now that things run themselves I feel less pressure to log in and top things up. While things tick over on my island I've earned enough to buy myself a motorbike and a sentient aubergine to ride around on. Now I'm spending my days touring the known world, quietly enjoying the sights. Who needs raids when you can have an island empire instead? ■

IT FELT LIKE SUCH A NICE CHANGE TO JUST POOTLE ABOUT COLLECTING LOGS

GUILD WARS 2

Let's check in with Secrets of the Obscure. *By Phil Savage*

Last year, ArenaNet announced a new direction for *Guild Wars 2*. Smaller expansions, but released more frequently – each one rolling out in stages across the course of a year. *Secrets of the Obscure*, the fourth expansion, was the first to be released under this new structure. It came with two open world maps, a couple of new endgame strike missions and a handful of new features. It also came with a roadmap detailing the rest of the expansion, with a new part planned each quarterly update.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE August 28, 2012	**DEVELOPER** ArenaNet
PUBLISHER NCSoft	**LINK** guildwars2.com

In many ways then, we're still only three quarters of the way through *SotO*'s launch. Still, I've seen enough of it now to get some sense of how well this new direction is working.

Broadly, I'm optimistic about the current state of the game. One of *Guild Wars 2*'s major problems in the past was consistency. Sure, some of its Living World seasons were great. And both *Heart of Thorns* and *Path of Fire* were excellent expansions. But between the periods when great stuff was happening, there was often very little to do. Over its lifespan I've gone long periods without touching the game – in part because its horizontal progression systems don't punish players for taking an extended break, but also because there was a lack of new things to come back to.

Now it feels more active, with the expansion updates being supplemented by festivals and interstitial bonus events that offer some extra rewards for returning to older parts of the game.

The new development format also seems to have empowered ArenaNet to make quality-of-life features a greater focus. Alongside regular balance patches, each update has also reworked some older part of the game – fixing up dungeons, streamlining older currencies and even reworking post-processing effects to be more granular, meaning you can benefit from some extra graphical flair without having to suffer through the game's overbaked, headache-inducing bloom.

WIZARDING WORLD

So things are looking up from a delivery standpoint, but what about the things actually being delivered? Here it's more of a mixed bag. The expansion launched well. The Commander, with nothing much to do following the end of the Dragon Saga, discovers a society of wizards waging secret war against a demonic threat. New characters were introduced and maps were full of interesting ideas, even though not all of them were explored in depth.

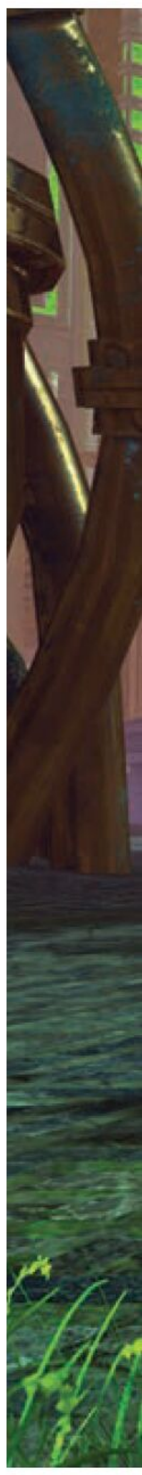
But in the subsequent updates, the quality has taken something of a dive. The third map is being released in chunks – a third of it arriving with each new major release. That's a lot of pressure to put on a single space, and Inner Nayos doesn't feel up to the task. It's fine – it's cool to have a map based in the demonic realm. But it doesn't stand up to the pressure of being the only new zone to visit across a nine-month span of time. The story, too, is much weaker. The expansion introduced a host of fun new characters, but we've left almost all of them behind to fight alongside some demons against some other demons in missions that take just a couple of hours every three months.

BROADLY, I'M OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE STATE OF THE GAME

It just feels lacking, especially compared to Icebrood Saga's Drizzlewood Coast map – another zone that was released in separate chunks, but one containing a lengthy meta event with rewards that make it still worth playing today.

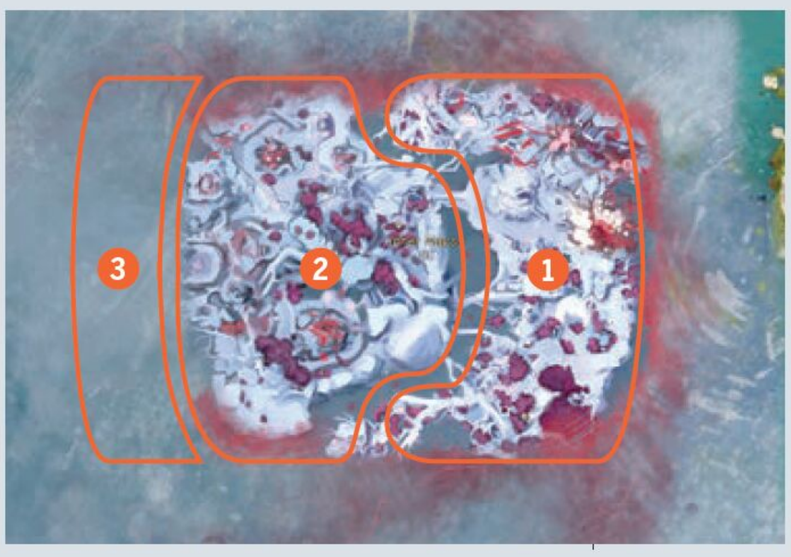
I just don't find myself visiting Inner Nayos all that often. To me, it's the weakest element of the new expansion, made worse from the fact it's the one designed to keep players busy while we wait for the next release. And yet, there's still plenty to do. The new legendary armour set is a good addition for long-term investment, and the most recent update also gave each profession access to a new weapon archetype, expanding each class's toolkit and shaking up builds.

It's not perfect then, but *Secrets of the Obscure* is a decent first attempt at developing to a new cadence. The real question is whether ArenaNet can keep up the pace, and actually deliver a new expansion this year that is – dare I hope it – even better than this first draft. ■



NAYOS TO MEET YOU

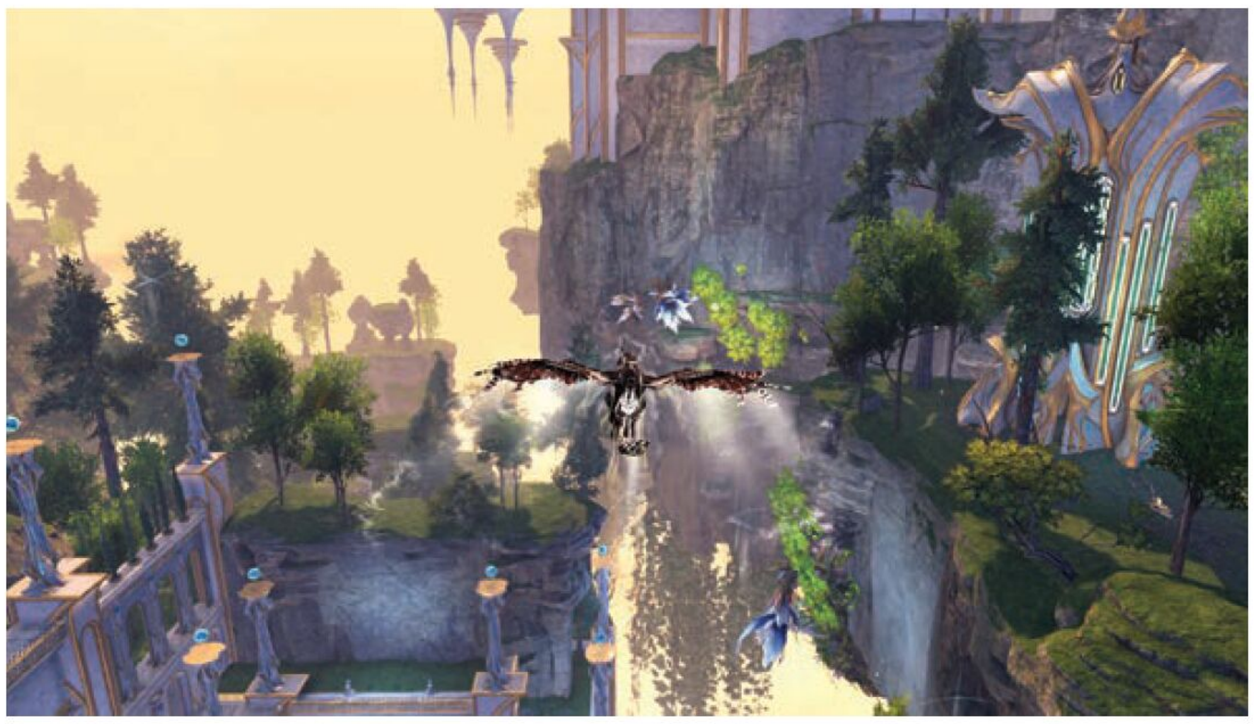
The expansion's third map still isn't done



1 HEITOR'S TERRITORY
The eastern part of the map belongs to the demon general Heitor. It's largely a rural introduction to the area.

2 NYEDRA SURROUNDS
The more populated middle of the map was released in the second update.

3 UNKNOWN
The final chunk of the map will arrive in the next update, and appears to contain the headquarters of main villain Eparch, king of the Kryptis.



ABOVE: Zojja returns after a lengthy absence.

FAR LEFT: The Amnytas map is a griffon rider's paradise.

The floating fractals of Skywatch put a fun spin on some old maps.

MULTI-SEAT VEHICLES

Ride together, die together. *By Tyler Wilde*

LEFT: Nothing like a missile to warm up a frigid space walk.

This only occurred to me recently, but it's been true for a long time: multi-seat vehicles are one of my absolute favourite videogame things. In *Battlefield* games, I'll even jump into a vehicle when the only seat available is a passenger seat, just to look out the window. I just love to go for rides.

I'm only talking about vehicles in multiplayer games. I get no special thrill out of NPC-piloted helicopters or on-rails tanks. The real-world version doesn't really inspire delight in me, either. When my dad's driving a car that I'm in, I don't think, "Wow, so cool: dad is driving". And on aeroplanes, I really try not to think much about the pilot. Better to leave some things a mystery. But I'm a sucker for videogames in which one person steers while another shoots.

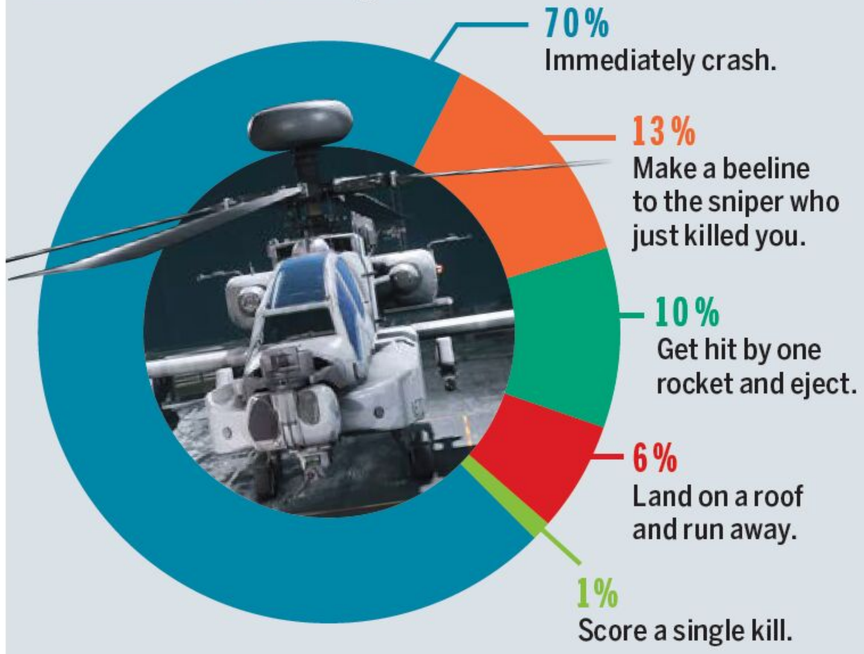
ON A BOAT

I think the reason for that partially has to do with my continued sense of awe over the existence of online multiplayer at all. Ever since *Bolo*, an early networked tank game from the '80s, the idea that I can occupy the same world as another player has blown my mind. The whole thing is really an illusion, of course, since it'd be more accurate to say that we occupy synchronised copies of the same world, but that illusion is never as convincing as it is when I'm attached to a big moving object with a bunch of comrades.

Back in the original *EverQuest*, I was obsessed with the ship that ferried players from Freeport across the Ocean of Tears, a journey which was probably a few minutes but felt to me like a long voyage. You had to climb onto the deck of the ship, and you could even fall off mid-trip. Being on that boat did more to make Norrath feel like a real place to me than anything else in *EverQuest*.

SPIRALING OUT

What to do when piloting a* Battlefield *helicopter



On top of making pretend places feel real, nothing generates camaraderie like vehicles, which bind together the fates of everyone on board – right up until we all start bailing as the *Sea of Thieves* ship sinks or the *Battlefield* chopper goes into a tailspin.

I once saw a video from an early version of *Star Citizen* in which one player fell out of a multi-person spaceship and went tumbling toward the planet they'd been orbiting.

YOU COULD EVEN STAND ON THE WINGS OF FLYING PLANES, IF YOU WERE CAREFUL

Another player, still in the ship, pointed its nose toward the planet and gunned it to catch up to their freefalling comrade. They got under their friend and caught them in the open bay door. If that's the kind of thing that can regularly happen in *Star Citizen*, then Chris Roberts can keep crowdfunding it forever as far as I'm concerned.

There's a more accessible-looking co-op space game on the horizon that I've got my eyes on, too, called *Jump Ship*. I got to play a bit of it at GDC in March, and was delighted to find that I could go clomping around on the outside of our spaceship while another player flew it around. You can even make yourself useful while standing out there by pulling out a missile launcher and shooting at enemy ships. That'll be out in Early Access sometime this year.

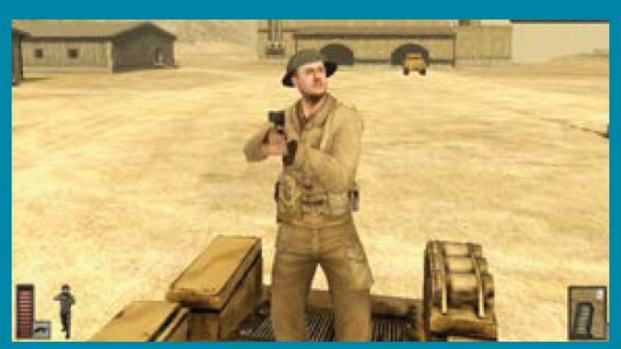
ON A BOAT

EverQuest aside, *Battlefield 1942* was probably the game that really solidified my love of multi-seat vehicles. I can't be the only one who was fascinated by them, because I distinctly remember everyone in the servers going to great lengths to turn even the single-seat vehicles into personnel carriers by standing on top of them. You could even stand on the wings of flying planes, if you were careful, and I was disappointed when the more realistic physics of later *Battlefield* games put an end to that.

Still, over 20 years later, hanging out in the passenger seat of a helicopter or tank or Jeep is still my favourite thing to do in *Battlefield*. When, as a gunner, you really click with your pilot, or vice versa, it feels like you've developed a supernatural psychic bond. PCPP's Morgan Park and I once spent a whole *Battlefield 2042* match buzzing around in a hovercraft, making our own game out of keeping it running for as long as we could, and I can't think of a more fun way to play.

As we're seeing in *Helldivers 2* with its unforgiving friendly fire, one of the most interesting things a multiplayer game can ask players to do is trust each other, and there's no better time to say "trust me" than when you're pointing a vehicle at something dangerous and smashing the accelerator. (See: any *PUBG* highlight reel.) ■

LEFT: It's polite to go down with the helicopter.



THE PCPP INVESTIGATOR

DICK RAY-TRACING *is who PC gamers go to for help when no one else will. This month's case: Dial M For MOBA*

Right off the cuff, I didn't like the smell of the gig. After dark I was to head to Den-Den Town, the old electronics district, and meet a contact codenamed Jinx who had promised they could reveal why my client Elsa's ex-boyfriend, Billy, had been killed, strangled to death with the cord of his Razer Basilisk V3 gaming mouse.

It was a dark and dismal night, and wetter than a PC gamer's pants just after Nvidia releases its new flagship GPU. Den-Den Town was a shadow of its former glory, now just a two-bit neon strip of a place selling retro PC gaming hardware at sky-high prices. I shook my head in disgust as I walked past Retro Ron's RGB Emporium and saw an Nvidia GeForce GT 1030 DDR4 ringing in for three figures.

Lighting a cigarette as the rain drummed on the rim of my fedora, I slipped down a back alley to the arranged meeting spot. In the shadows, behind industrial bins filled with copies of long-dead PC gaming magazines, a figure spoke from the shadows, revealing what would turn out to be the grim truth. I never got a good look at the speaker, but I swear I caught a glimpse of blue hair.

It turned out Billy had been two-timing Elsa, his DOTA 2 partner, with a League of Legends player named Alice, playing the other MOBA behind Elsa's back and, at one point, professing to Alice that League was his only true love. Billy slipped up, though. One day he referred to Ashe as Traxex while laning with Alice and, now suspicious, she then followed him to his home and discovered his secret life as DOTA 2 player. Alice had strangled Billy as he jungled.

When confronted, Alice came with me peacefully. I think her heart had been broken by the betrayal. As for Billy, he'd learned a key PC gaming lesson the hard way... one MOBA is always enough.

CASE CLOSED

...UNTIL AUGUST 19

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